

Exodus 5

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Date: 17 November 2013

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, just when you think things are only up, when things seem to be going well in life, there are setbacks, aren't there?

! There are disappointments in life. In this chapter in Exodus, there is another terrible blow for the life of Moses and God's people, isn't there?

I hear that the events of Exodus chapter 5 are pretty well documented in the history books, so in non-biblical history books, these things are pretty well recorded.

Non-Jewish accounts in the period between 1500 and 1200 BC correlate with this chapter. Records show an increase in brick production quotas, for an example, which were never met, interestingly enough.

You can see on the internet a painting from the period of Moses III showing an Egyptian taskmaster who is cartoon-like, looking over his slaves, and the caption underneath reads, The rod is in my hand. Do not be idle.

[1 : 18] The famous lament from Memphis in the 13th century goes like this. There are no men to make bricks, and no straw in the neighbourhood.

I reckon that probably sounds better, doesn't it, in the ancient Egyptian than it does in the English, but I think you get the point. When we read this dark chapter, it isn't just a script, is it, in a story. It isn't just a twist in a Hollywood blockbuster. It's real history, about real people with real experiences and real suffering, as we thought about this morning.

It's probably the darkest chapter in Exodus since chapter 1, which we looked at in our morning service. So I hope that today hasn't been too depressing for you.

But it comes, doesn't it, particularly as a shock to have this chapter, chapter 5, full of so much disappointment and darkness. Straight after the end of chapter 4.

[2 : 27] Maybe go and read that tonight. Where Moses finally obeys the Lord. He goes to Pharaoh. And if you look at chapter 4, verse 31, at the top of the page there.

The people believed. They'd heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel. And that he'd seen their afflictions. And they bowed their heads and worshipped. It's a great scene at the end of chapter 4.

Where the people finally realised that Moses has been spoken to by God. And he is their saviour. It's a great scene.

And then in chapter 5, verse 1. Moses has got this new confidence to go to Pharaoh. And to make this appeal on behalf of God.

Let the people go. So it all looks promising. But then in verse 2 come those heart-sinking words, don't they? At the beginning of verse 2.

[3 : 28] But Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? And let the people go. I don't know the Lord. And moreover I'll not let Israel go.

You see, chapter 5 is a chapter about when obedience to God often leads to immediate failure. I wonder if you've had those kind of but Pharaoh says moments in your Christian walk.

Maybe you've endeavoured to do something for the Lord. Or for his people. And you think you've just about nailed it. But Pharaoh says, You're not going anywhere.

We've had that sort of thing, haven't we, as a church. With the building project over the last couple of years. It's been a bit of a rollercoaster. It's when obedience seems to lead to failure.

Now, before we move on, it's worth noting that before Moses actually went to Pharaoh in the beginning of chapter 5, all of this disappointment had been told to him already.

[4 : 37] God had categorically and clearly told him that all of this would happen. And just flip back to chapter 4 and verse 21. The Lord said to Moses, in chapter 4 verse 21, See, he's already told

Moses that this would all happen.

And God warns us, doesn't he, so many times in the Bible that obeying him will mean suffering and disappointment at times.

That's just the fact of the matter. But by the end of chapter 5, Moses seems to have forgotten those warnings, doesn't he? Look at what he says in verse 22.

Well, what it says there, Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you even ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak your name, he has done evil to this people, and you've not delivered the people at all.

Well, Moses has got a short-lived memory, hasn't he? But isn't there always a part of us that hears the Bible's teaching about Christian suffering, and it says, Well, I know we heard that this morning, but actually, that's them.

[6 : 11] And this is me. I'm different. I'm leading this ministry. Or IPC is involved in this, so it should be a cinch.

There is a sense, isn't there, when God, we don't take God seriously about when he teaches us about suffering and disappointment, until it actually happens.

It's an easy trap to fall into, isn't it, if life is going really well for us. Sometimes, though, the going is good, and then suddenly setbacks do come, and the suffering intensifies as a result.

Just look at verse 10 and 11 of chapter 5. So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, Thus says Pharaoh, I'll not give you straw.

Go and get your own straw to make the bricks, wherever you can find it, and your work will not be reduced in the very least. Maybe that sounds like your boss at work, or your teacher, this week, perhaps.

[7 : 13] But the work is increased, isn't it? And the suffering is worsened. And it's a terrible miscarriage of justice. We should be boiling, shouldn't we?

Our blood should be boiling. It's so unfair. It's the worst kind of slavery. And it's all because Moses obeys. That's the sting in the tail, isn't it?

So what is God doing? It's so confusing. But Pharaoh said, I won't let the people go.

Now what I'd like us to realise for the next few minutes in this chapter is that while it is a historical account, it also reveals to us another deeper reality, like this morning.

It's here to teach us a lesson about what God is like, and what life is like in the world for his people.

Now Moses writes the book of Exodus in a time of imperialism in the world.

[8 : 20] It's where kings and emperors ruled, and they jostled for power. And they jostled, most importantly, for the control of people.

They fought for the service of populations. They wanted more people to serve them, and to bring wealth to their empire.

And Moses speaks into that context. And so what we have in this chapter is the clash between two kings to be a ruler over a people.

So look at verse 1. Moses says, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Let my people go.

Thus says the Lord. So he's the first master, isn't he, in the passage. But then look down at verse 10. Pharaoh retorts, doesn't he, in exactly the same words.

[9 : 26] Thus says Pharaoh. Pharaoh, I will not give you straw, and I'll not let the people go, he says later. Do you see what the writer is doing there?

He is putting Pharaoh and God as two competitors, isn't he? As two masters for the service of the people. Pharaoh puts himself up as God in the lives of the people.

He uses the exact same words. And he says, No, I'm not letting the people go. They're mine.

They're my people. It's the clash, isn't it, of two masters for the allegiance and service of the people.

So just notice that the book of Exodus isn't just about releasing the Israelites from slavery. It is about that. But it's about releasing them from slavery for something else.

It is about releasing them from one service to another. From the service of one king, Pharaoh, to another, God. Verse 1, God says, Let them go so they may hold a fast to me.

[10 : 42] Verse 3, they say, Let us go so we can sacrifice to the Lord. And Pharaoh knows it, doesn't he? Verse 8, They're idle, he says, therefore they cry, let us go and sacrifice to our God.

Verse 17, You're idle, you're idle, he says. That's why you say, let us go and sacrifice to the Lord. You see, it's clear, Pharaoh knows what's going on in this passage too, doesn't he?

He knows that it's a battle for the service of the people. Between him and God. And the people will either serve one of those two kings.

And so, the darkness of this chapter, it cries out to us, doesn't it, of this battle. The battle of the service of the people.

And it's a battle that each one of us is involved in. That we are torn between two masters. You've got two masters to serve, just as Bob Dylan said.

[11 : 49] You've got to serve somebody. So the first thing that we see this evening about these masters is that Pharaoh wants his servants. Pharaoh wants his servants and he wants to be master.

He is the one who sets himself up as God's enemy. He's bent, isn't he, on taking God's people for himself. Pharaoh. It's like that poster of Uncle Sam, isn't it?

I want you for the US Army. He's on a recruitment drive. Who is the Lord that I should listen to him? Now I guess if you read Exodus he will regret saying that, won't he?

But Pharaoh is determined to take anyone who wants to worship God and captivate them into worshipping and serving him.

Now he'll do it in various ways. So he'll do it first of all with propaganda and lies. Have a look at verse 9. Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labour at it and pay no attention to lying words.

[12 : 57] Do you see what he's doing there? He's calling God a liar. He's saying that everything that these Hebrews believe in that makes them want to escape it is a lie.

It's poppycock leaving me Pharaoh to serve this God of the Hebrews while I don't even know him. It's a big lie.

There is nothing out there for you if you leave me he says. You will have nothing. This is where you belong with me serving me.

So he lies to them. But secondly he does it with suffering too doesn't he? He increases the workload he increases the impression he increases the trouble and the persecution.

It's a combination isn't it of sweetness and sourness. I don't know if you've seen the line the witch and the wardrobe and the old BBC version is what I remember.

[14 : 00] But C.S. Lewis captures that really well doesn't he in the character of the white witch who tempts Edward in with Turkish delight so sweet and then oppresses him with chains and whips.

That is Pharaoh through and through isn't it? He wants the people for his servants but secondly this evening he wants you as his servant.

He wants you as his servant. he wants to be your master. Now as the Bible unfolds we start to see that Pharaoh in ancient Egypt is a picture of the devil.

And although the king of Egypt may have died long since this passage was written Pharaoh is still at large. If you've been around maybe these past few Sunday nights as Paul has taken us through the book of Revelation we've seen there haven't we that Pharaoh is a picture of the devil.

And the Bible says that the devil is real, that he is a real person and that he is working to enslave, to capture God's people. So Satan wants to take God's people and to have them serve him.

[15 : 19] And throughout the Bible he uses Pharaoh's tactics, doesn't he? The two are the same. So he was the first one to call God a liar. Same thing isn't it?

In Genesis 3. He calls God into question. He says, did he really say don't eat from any of the trees in the garden? Well he misquotes God, doesn't he?

God didn't say that. You won't surely die Eve. God is just a spoiled sport, isn't he? There's nothing for you with him.

Go on, do life your way. You're the boss. God but Jesus calls him the father of lies. He is a propaganda expert, isn't he you see?

And he is the one who Jesus says prowls around like a lion waiting to devour. See, Pharaoh still wants you.

[16 : 19] It's a battle for two kings for the service of the people. people. So dark times in the life of God's people aren't just arbitrary things, they're not just random. They happen because there is a battle going on.

And it's a battle to captivate your heart and your service. Setbacks and failures come, huge suffering often is experienced for the church because Pharaoh is still out there.

He is wonderfully defeated at the cross, isn't he? There is nothing to fear, ultimately, from him. He is the devil, but he is on a leash, as somebody once said.

But he's angry. What did Jesus say about him to Peter in the Gospels? Satan desires to have you, Peter, to sift you like wheat.

He masquerades around like God, doesn't he? Thus says Pharaoh. And he battles for the service of the people. He battles for you with lies and sin as if they were Turkish delight treats.

[17 : 33] Pharaoh would have you as his servant. But thirdly and lastly, in the darkness, we terrifyingly see that we would have him as our master, third of all.

We would have him as our master. He wants us to be his servants to live for him. That's the devil. And we would even allow him to be our master.

Now the big question that I guess we all have when we read a chapter like Exodus chapter 5 is why does God allow any of this to happen? Why give Pharaoh any room at all?

Why not just rescue the people and have it done with? Why allow Satan to operate? That's a big question that people often ask, isn't it? And that does happen, just read Job chapter 1.

And it's a burning question. Why allow suffering God? The situation, it becomes unbearable for the people, doesn't it? So much so that the foremen, who would have been Israelites, go to the Egyptian masters in verse 15, 13, and they complain, don't they?

[18 : 45] Look there. Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, make bricks.

And then they complain at Moses too, don't they, in verse 21. The Lord look on you and judge, because you've made us stink, that's literally the word to stink, in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hands to kill us.

Now, one thing about these foremen, is that they probably would have had positions of relative power and authority in the land.

They were managers of the Hebrew workforce, if you like. So, it would have taken a great deal for them to stand up and protest to their Egyptian bosses.

Notice how they have not said a word, have they, until this point, in five chapters of suffering for God's people in Exodus. This is the first time that they speak, even though there's been plenty of suffering already.

[19 : 57] So, there is a sense, isn't there, in which, until now, these Israelite foremen, these managers, were content, even, with the status quo.

Pharaoh. They would have had Pharaoh as their master, perhaps. And not only then, but as the whole people looked back on their time in Egypt later, in Exodus, they remember it with kind of rose-tinted spectacles.

Just turn to chapter 16, and verse 3. chapter 16, verse 3.

And they've been rescued, they've come out from the land of Egypt, and they start to complain, don't they, about life in the wilderness. And they say, would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots.

Oh, it was so good, wasn't it? And they ate bread to the full. Do you remember those good times in Egypt? That's what it was like, wasn't it? They're deluded, aren't they?

[21 : 09] Of course it wasn't like that. They hated the slavery, didn't they? They were treated ruthlessly. But you see, there was another side to the people of God, a side that would have had Pharaoh as their master again.

They would have gone back. It was the sweet and sour, you see, the bittersweet temptations of life in Egypt. The rose-tinted spectacle version of what it's like to serve Pharaoh, to serve the devil.

And that's what we're like, isn't it, so often. We can turn from sin one moment, one day, and then the next we're doing it again, aren't we? And it feels so good at the time, making sure your spouse knows that you've won the argument, or flying off the handle at work, or going to that website.

So you see, as one writer puts it, the exodus and salvation itself isn't so much about getting the people out of Egypt, it's more about getting Egypt out of the people.

It was Robert E. Lee, the Confederate commander during the American Civil War, who said, it is good that war is so terrible, otherwise, we should grow too fond of it.

[22 : 38] See, for Robert E. Lee, war was fun as a commander. All the tactics, and all the effort, all the teamwork that it took, and all the success that he had, it was fun for him.

And so he had to say it's good that it was so terrible so that I didn't love it too much. And you see, it was the same for the people, wasn't it?

They were so desperate to leave because of their suffering. They were desperate to serve God instead. And you see how God in his wisdom and love allowed that so that they would be free from serving Pharaoh.

to serve him so that later in chapter 15 and verse 13 they sing that great song, don't they? They sing you've led us in your steadfast love, the people you redeemed.

You guided them by your strength to your holy abode. We're so glad we got out Lord. We're so glad we're serving you instead now, instead.

[23 : 44] Thank you. And perhaps for you and I, maybe not in all cases, perhaps it is good that there are those disappointments and sufferings.

Because actually in our heart of hearts we would have Pharaoh as our master again. Can we admit that sometimes we'd have been willing to stay with the devil if we'd not seen how terrible the prospect of that really is?

King David says, doesn't he, in Psalm 119, before I was afflicted, before I had those disappointments, I went astray, but now I keep your word, I serve you.

I heard this story when I was preparing this talk of an English Methodist minister called William Sangster. And William Sangster became seriously ill during the last couple of years of his life, and he got this disease called muscular atrophy, which meant that slowly over time his muscles stopped working.

So it started with his legs, his legs stopped working, he couldn't walk, and then eventually his upper body stopped working, and eventually he lost his voice, he couldn't use his voice anymore, and the only way that he could communicate was to lift his weak hand, and to write his spidery writing in his journal to communicate.

[25 : 20] Well, after he died, they found a copy of his journal, and on Easter day, they found this entry, he wrote this, it's terrible to wake up on an Easter morning, and not have a voice to shout, he is risen, but it would be even more terrible to have a voice, and not want to shout it.

See, that would be real slavery. The darkness comes, because there is a battle for your heart, for your service, suffering comes, because Pharaoh still wants you, but in God's love and his sovereignty, he will use those disappointments that the devil throws at us, and those letdowns, because he knows that there is a side of us that would have him as our master again.

He doesn't want to just take you out of Egypt to get you to heaven, but he wants to take Egypt out of you. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word.

Let's pray. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's