

Exodus 4:18-31

'The God I don't yet fully understand'

A Personal testimony

A few months ago I celebrated thirty years of being a Christian.

And as I reflect on the differences between when I first became a Christian, I've realised that I'm much more settled in my understanding of God than I was at eighteen.

My understanding of God has settled as I've read the Scriptures, as I've grappled with the joy and pain of being God's person, as I've worked at being a husband, a father, or as I've struggled to explain God to other people.

However, I would also have to say that there are some things that are less settled now than they were thirty years ago.

You see, the more I've read the Scriptures and lived in God's world, the more I find that there are some things I don't understand.

And one of the reasons I love reading the Old Testament is because I find that I'm not the only one.

As I read, I find people being honest about life and faith.

I find them arguing with God.

I find them expressing their dismay, their surprise, their angst, and their pain.

And I find God engaging with them.

I find him loving them and being himself with them.

Can you see what I'm saying?

I'm saying that as I read parts of the Bible I find that the authors of the Bible raise big issues about God and with God.

I find them being honest with God and about God.

And I find this refreshing.

For their world is my world.

Their God is my God.

And their questions are my questions.

Friends, I have started this way today because I think today's passage says some things that are difficult to understand.

I want to say this up front with you.

And I want to tell you that my hope as we look at this passage together is that together we will not fudge what we find.

But I also hope that together we will work out a way to approach these things in a way that honours the God who caused these things to be written for our instruction.

So, with these things said, let's turn to Exodus 4:18-31.

Surveying the passage

Remembering the past

As we've done each week, let's remember where we have been so far.

Chapter 1 recalled Genesis and told us that Abraham's descendants found themselves in Egypt under a cruel tyrant who enslaved them.

On top of that he attempted genocide against the Israelites by ordering the deaths of their infants.

We heard how this was thwarted by some Hebrew midwives.

And we watched as one couple attempted to save their son by putting him in a basket on the river Nile.

This son was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up in Pharaoh's household.

He became known as Moses.

This Moses grew up and became a wanted man in Egypt.

He fled Egypt and found shelter with the Midianites.

Then, at the end of chapter 2, we heard that the people of God groaned out to God and that he heard their groaning, he remembered the covenant, he saw their plight, and he knew.

Last week we saw God intrude into shepherd existence of Moses and call him to be the agent of rescue for the Israelites.

And that brings us to our passage for this week.

In verses 18-31 we are told of three incidents.

Incident 1: The departure from Jethro (4:18-23)

The first incident is in verses 18-23.

It tells us of the departure from Jethro's household.

The first thing we notice is that Moses is less than clear with Jethro as to why he is returning to Egypt.

Although God had been quite clear as to why Moses is going, Moses is not willing to lay things on the table for his father-in-law.

We are not told why this is the case.

We are simply told what Moses tells his father-in-law.

We are also told that one of the immediate threats to the safety of Moses and his family is no longer there – those who wanted to kill him are now dead.

Verse 20 tells us that Moses is not returning to Egypt emptyhanded.

He returns with a family; a Midianite wife, some sons, and a shepherd's staff that had now become the staff of God.

Lastly, we hear God briefing Moses about his mission in Egypt.

In the previous chapter we heard that Moses had some signs for the Israelites to convince them that God had sent Moses.

In this section we hear that there are also some signs for Pharaoh.

And then we are told of how intense the conflict is going to be.

It is a conflict between two Kings and two fathers.

Pharaoh has enslaved God's firstborn son and so God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son.

Incident 2: A strange encounter (4:24-26)

With this we move to the second incident in verses 24-26.

And all of a sudden we have problems.

The translation of the Hebrew is not clear in our Bible's and so I've provided an alternative.

²⁴Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.²⁵Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his feet. She said, 'You are a bridegroom of blood to me.'²⁶So he let him alone. (At that time she said, 'bridegroom of blood,' because of the circumcision.)

These are the questions I have...

- Who is it that the Lord wants to kill? Is it the son or Moses?
- If it is Moses, why would the Lord want to kill him just after he has given him a command to go and deliver the Israelites?
- What exactly does Zipporah do and why?
- How come Zipporah realises there is a problem and does something? Why doesn't Moses realise?
- Moses is said to have 'sons' (plural) but only one son is circumcised. Why?
- Whose 'feet' does she touch with the foreskin?
- Who let whom alone?
- What does 'bridegroom of blood' mean?

Now in my view the only things we can be sure of is that (1) the Lord is seeking to kill someone, and (2) that what is happening is about circumcision.

Having said this, here is my offer of an interpretation.

Take it with a pinch of salt.

There are no guarantees on it because no one seems to be sure of their interpretation.

1. For some reason, Moses or his son has not been circumcised yet.
2. Moses is on his way to Egypt to rescue God's covenant people.
3. However, he or his sons or one of his sons does not have the covenant sign of circumcision yet.
4. Moses is seriously ill or incapacitated by some disastrous illness or incident that clearly comes from the hand of God. His life is under threat from God. He may be so incapacitated that he cannot respond himself.
5. Zipporah reads the situation. She understands what is going on – God is angry with Moses for his disobedience to the commands given in Genesis 17 about circumcision.
6. So she grabs one of the boys, circumcises him, holds the foreskin to the genitals of Moses or the genitals of the boy ('feet') and declares Moses to be a bridegroom of blood.
7. Somehow this act satisfies God and takes away the problem. God backs off and lets Moses alone.

This brings us to the end of Section 2.

Incident 3: Encounters with Aaron and the Israelites (4:27-31)

The third incident has a sense of anticlimax about it.

Moses meets Aaron and everything is okay.

Moses and Aaron meet the Israelite elders and everything is okay.

Together they bow down and worship when they see how God has heard and seen.

The stage is now fully set for the confrontation between God and Pharaoh.

A way into this passage

Okay, so there is the story.

Now I would warrant that the vast majority of you have never heard a sermon on this passage.

It is my guess that in your lifetime you will never again hear a sermon on this passage.

This is not a preacher's passage.

However, this is a passage from God's word.

It was put here by God for a purpose.

And so, like all Scripture, there is sure to be something here that will teach, rebuke, correct, or train us in righteousness.

So let's have a look and see what we can find.

Things I DON'T understand

Let me start off by talking about the things I don't understand in this passage.

And there are a whole host of them.

First, I want you to look with me at verse 21:

²¹And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

The language is clear – God is the one behind Pharaoh's hardening of heart.

Now I want you to look at 8:15.

Exodus 8:15 says:

¹⁵But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.

The implication and statement here are also clear – Pharaoh resists of his own free will.

How can both of these statements be true at the same time?

I don't know.

But I know that they are.

And I know that if my explanation of this mystery diminishes either statement then perhaps I'm not being faithful with the text.

But there are other things I don't understand here.

Take a look at verse 23:

²³I said to you, "Let my son go that he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.' "

When I read this passage, I can't help reading it as a Christian.

And as a Christian I've heard the words of Jesus about turning your cheek and the like.

But there is none of that here, is there?

God has a son, that son is under threat, and he, God, will kill another person's son in order to free his son.

This is tough and hard.

It is all about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a life for a life.

But it is also about a love that will do anything for a loved one.

This too, I find hard to understand.

But there is more.

I don't understand verse 24 when it talks about God seeking to kill Moses.

I know Moses has been somewhat reluctant.

I know he is something of an unwilling conscript.

I know he has been somewhat slack with regard to his own covenant response.

But verse 24 seems very tough.

It doesn't fit neatly with what I think God would and would not do.

- Implications

So, what are the implications of these things I don't understand?

The implication is clear, isn't it?

The implication is that my view of God is still lacking something.

The clear implication is that my view of God is not as strong as it should be.

But there is more than that.

A clear implication is that there are things of God that I can perhaps never understand.

Perhaps this is the way things will always be.

Because God is God and I am a feeble human being.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to assume that I can ever plumb the depths of God.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to assume that I will ever understand all that God does.

And perhaps I should recognise this.

And when I find myself not understanding, perhaps I should view the things I don't understand in the light of the things I know to be true.

For in the cross of Jesus I know that God is a God who is just.

In the cross, I know that God is a God who loves me so much that he sent his Son to die in my place.

This I understand.

And sometimes I am going to have to cling to these things and put the things I don't understand in a folder marked 'pending'.

For what I know for certain is enough to sustain me.

Things I DO understand

Having said this, I need to go on and explain that for all the difficulties of this passage, there are some things that I DO understand about it.

Let me tell you about some of them.

The first thing I understand is that the God of Exodus 4 is much more than the God I often hear spoken about.

The God of Exodus 4 is holy.

He is terrifying in his holiness and justice and tough love.

He is not tame.

Nor is he docile.

He is dangerous to be around.

He is not the tame God I often hear about in our songs and choruses.

He is the holy Creator of all the earth to whom all will one day bow the knee.

But let me press on.

You see, no matter how you interpret the details of verses 24-26 there is a one part of it that does not go away.

You see, verse 24-26 give us a pattern that we have seen time and time again in the Bible.

You see, here we have a man who has been miraculously rescued by God as a child.

He has been preserved by God from harm from his countrymen.

He has heard God's voice from a burning bush.

He has been called out by God for a special purpose.

He has been on the receiving end of God's blessing and God's provision.

And yet he has not even kept the most rudimentary aspects of God's covenant obligations.

He is has been called to be the agent of the God of the covenant but he hasn't even ensured that the males of his family were the sign of the covenant.

Now this pattern of behaviour is one that is repeated time and time again in the book of Exodus and in the Old Testament as a whole.

Time and time again we will hear the children of Israel calling out for God to remember his covenant.

We will hear them urging him in their prayers, their laments, their psalms, their songs, and their sacrifices.

And time and time again we will hear how God responds in surprising, unobligated, love and faithfulness.

Where there had been sin, there will be forgiveness.

Where there was judgment, there will be mercy.

Where there was slavery, there will be rescue.

And the people of God will do what they do so readily in this passage.

They will bow down and worship.

But when the time comes to trust God or obey God they will fail.

And they will fail again.

They will sin with a high hand.

And they will refuse to keep even the most rudimentary aspects of their covenant obligations.

For example, they won't even keep the Sabbath.

And eventually God will tire of their faithlessness.

He will become angry at their sin.

And he will stretch out his hand in judgment and exile.

Please let's not fudge what this passage says.

It tells us an uncomfortable truth.

That truth is that our God is the living and holy God.

He is the God who is deeply saddened and angered by human sin.

And he is angered with our sin.

But he is also the God who has allowed his anger to be turned away through the death of Jesus for us.

He is longsuffering, not wanting any to perish.

He continues to give us time to find shelter in the escape offered in the death of Jesus.

And he continues to call us to proclaim that escape through proclamation of the gospel.

And he continues to call you and me to be his agents.

And it is here that I want us to hear this passage again.

You see, many of us are here because we believe that God may want us to give ourselves to this ministry.

Well, friends, let me urge you to take care.

For this scripture and the life of Moses as a whole tells us that the leaders of God's people are judged with a stricter judgment.

As Jesus says in Matthew 18, those who have put stumbling blocks in the way of God's people will suffer a punishment worse than having a millstone hung around their necks and being drowned in the deepest part of the sea.

Or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, those who build God's house will have their work tested by fire.

You see, God is holy.

And God loves his people.

And he loves them so much that he will judge those who hurt his children.

Friends, if you are going into the ministry of the word of God and of leadership over the people of God, do so with carefulness and prayerfulness.

In the words of 1 Timothy 4, watch your life and doctrine carefully.

Train yourself in godliness.

Or as God instructs us in 1 Peter, be examples to the flock.

You see, the church is not a business, not an enterprise, not a company or corporation.

It is the congregation of God's people.

It is the company of God's greatly loved covenant people, the church of the firstborn.

And you have a chief shepherd to whom you must give an account.