

Bricks Without Straw: Exodus 5:1-6.1

Encounter with Pharaoh

Approach

It's easy to imagine how Moses might have felt as he went to approach Pharaoh in Exodus 5.

He had experienced one of those great mountaintop experiences.

God had met with him.

God had spoken to him.

God had assured him that his mission would be successful.

God had given him great signs and wonders to bring to Pharaoh.

And on top of that, stage 1 of God's mission had been a resounding success.

For, in Exodus 4:29-31 Moses met with the Israelite elders.

And the elders listened to him.

They watched the signs Moses performed.

And they accepted what Moses said.

The reception they gave Moses was all that he could have expected.

And so my guess was that Moses was brimming with confidence as he marched into the presence of Pharaoh.

And my guess is confirmed by the way he acts and speaks.

First, he is brave enough to forget about God's order to take the elders with him to Pharaoh.

Second, you can see his confidence in the way he speaks in verse 1.

He uses the language of a prophet – 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...'

The tone is that of an order.

Pharaoh must hear God's word.

He must obey God's word.

He must let God's people go.

Response

In verse 2 Pharaoh responds.

It is a response that is full of sarcasm, if not outright scorn.

Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.

Pharaoh has no knowledge or experience of the Lord.

And he has no respect for him.

There is therefore no reason for him to listen to what he says.

And of all the things he is likely to do with this bunch of slaves, sending them out into the wilderness for a festival is the very last thing he would consider.

Moses and Aaron again

This must have been a devastating blow to the confidence of Moses and Aaron.

You can see this in their toned down second speech in verse 3.

Apology and explanation has supplanted command.

First, they explain that 'the Lord' is 'the God of the Hebrews'.

Second, they explain that he has met with them.

Third, 'celebrating a festival' has become 'to sacrifice'.

In other words, what sounded like a party has now become a religious obligation.

And fourth, they shift the pressure from Pharaoh to themselves.

They have been pressed by God and if they don't obey God might fall upon them in judgment.

The uncompromising divine command has now turned into a weak-kneed appeal to Pharaoh's self interest.

After all, they wouldn't want Pharaoh to lose some of his valuable slaves because Yahweh was heavy handed with them in judgment.

Three days is a small cost to pay for some peace from a vengeful God.

Pharaoh's response

Pharaoh's response in verses 4 and 5 is uncompromising.

Moses and Aaron are distracting the people from their task.

Their task is to work for Pharaoh, not to obey this unknown God.

Pharaoh adds another element in verse 5.

These peasant slaves are now very numerous and a very integral part of the way Egypt functions.

Moses and Aaron are to cease stopping them from work.

And he, Pharaoh, will have nothing to do with it.

Conclusions

These verses contain the first words from Pharaoh about God.

He is Pharaoh.

He is clearly a leader in control.

And the God of the Israelites is of little or no consequence to him.

What's more, his people are only important insofar as they are available as his slave workforce.

These verses describe the real issue of this chapter and the following story.

The real issue is the question of who is really God.

Is Pharaoh really a self determined man who can disregard the God of Israel?

Is Pharaoh his own God?

Or is he subject to a real God, Yahweh?

This is the main focus of these chapters – the battle for supremacy between these two persons, God and Pharaoh.

The main issue is not the battle between Moses and Pharaoh.

The main issue is the contest between Pharaoh and Yahweh.

Consequences

Policy and implementation (5:6-14)

And the narrator wastes no time in pursuing this theme.

In verse 1, God commanded through his agents and his command fell on deaf ears.

In verse 6, Pharaoh commands his agents.

And it has brutal and oppressive consequences for the people of Yahweh.

Until now they have made bricks using pre-prepared chopped straw.

Not any longer.

Now the people of God will have to wander the countryside searching for straw and gathering it from wherever they can.

Verse 12 indicates that will now have to make bricks using the trashy stubble that was blown around by the wind.

It is a shrewd move by Pharaoh.

The boldness of Moses and Aaron will result in hardship for the people they claim to represent.

It will inevitably set the people against them.

However, there is even more behind this move than this.

Look at verse 10.

Can you see the similarity between verse 10 and verse 1?

In verse 1, the agents of God came to Pharaoh with an emphatic, ‘Thus says Yahweh!’

In verse 10 the agents of Pharaoh come to the people of God with an emphatic, ‘Thus says Pharaoh!’

And it is clear that Pharaoh has won round 1.

For his people are not rescued by a powerful God.

Instead, this powerful human king increases their pain and the misery of their slavery.

This increase is clearly painted in verses 10-21.

The taskmasters (5:15-21)

- With Pharaoh

Take a look at verse 10 again.

Verse 10 talks about supervisors 'of the people'.

Verses 14 and 15 indicate that these supervisors are Israelites.

And these Israelite supervisors are caught between two obligations – an obligation to Pharaoh and an obligation to their people.

They decide that they will speak up on behalf of the people.

Look at verse 15.

As Israel had 'cried out' to God in 2:23, these Israelite foremen 'cry out' to Pharaoh.

However, where God heard and saw and was concerned when the Israelites cried out to him, Pharaoh has no such concern.

In fact, not only is he unconcerned.

He even mocks them.

You are lazy, lazy!

It is clear that the approach by Moses and Aaron at the beginning of the chapter has incensed him.

He will take on this God, Yahweh.

And he will take on his prophets.

And he will torture his people.

- With Moses and Aaron

And verses 19-21 show us that Pharaoh's strategy is successful.

For now the supervisors come upon Moses and Aaron.

They forcefully accuse them of wrong.

Listen to their words from verse 21.

'The LORD look upon you and judge!

You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.'

They are clearly very angry with Moses and Aaron.

This is a massive turnaround, isn't it?

We started the chapter with two men marching into the presence of Pharaoh with the full support of God and his people and issuing an ultimatum to Pharaoh.

At the end of the chapter the same two men no longer have the support of their own people.

Instead, they are the brunt of harsh accusations and curses from the leaders of the people.

But there is more than this.

In Exodus 3:19 God said that the king of Egypt would not let the people go unless compelled by a mighty hand.

Well, read verse 21.

Whose hand is mighty here?

It is not God's hand.

The mighty hand in this chapter does not belong to Yahweh.

It is not directed at rescuing his people.

Rather, the mighty hand is the hand of Pharaoh to kill the people of God.

Talking with God

Rebuke and accusation

And so, the final verses of chapter 5 and the first verse of chapter 6 is not really that surprising.

Moses does not try and defend himself against the charged levelled by the foremen.

Instead, he goes to the source of his trouble.

He talks with God.

And just like Adam and Eve in the garden, Moses passes the blame.

The foremen blamed Moses and Aaron for the situation they found themselves in just like Eve blamed the serpent.

And Moses blames the Lord, just as Adam blamed God.

Listen to his words.

They are full of rebuke and accusation.

O Lord, why have YOU mistreated this people.

Why did you ever send me?

Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in YOUR name, he has mistreated this people, and YOU have done nothing at all to deliver YOUR people.

The protest by Moses is clear and potent.

In verse 9 Pharaoh said the words of God were deceptive words.

Moses appears to be wondering if this might not actually be true.

He has not lived up to his word of rescue.

He has not followed through his words with action.

He has done nothing at all.

And the end result is that Pharaoh has won the day.

Defence

But we could not finish this story without hearing God's response.

Listen to God's words in chapter 6 verse 1.

'Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh:

Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go;

by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.'

When God called Moses in chapter 3, he told him that the king of Egypt would not let the people go unless he was compelled by a mighty hand.

In those same verses, he told that he would stretch out his hand and strike Egypt with all his wonders and that only after that would he let the Israelites go.

However, he also said in 4:21 that he would harden the heart of Pharaoh.

God's point in 6:1 is that the former will still happen.

God has been keeping his word.

He has just not been keeping it in the way that Moses would like.

But there can be no doubt that the hand of Pharaoh which has a sword in it at the moment will not be the hand that triumphs.

No.

It is the Lord's mighty hand that will win the day.

God's hand may seem weak.

He may seem quiet.

He is very present.

Still hearing the cries of his people.

Still seeing.

He still knows.

And he will still rescue.

Thinking about the story

Its purpose

Okay, having gone through the story, I'd now like us to think about why God has put this chapter here.

My own view is that it is here to show the power of Pharaoh.

It is also here to show the weakness of Moses, Aaron, and Israel in the face of this power.

Pharaoh is a self confident king assured of his own place in time and space.

He is overwhelming in his grip on his own power in his own kingdom.

And so the chapter shows us the impossibility of the task in hand.

No human agent can resist Pharaoh.

No people power can overthrow his reign.

He is not a spongy, weak kneed, diplomat or politician.

He is a hard hearted, callous, despotic tyrant with hand raised in defiance.

Only some greater power, some greater hand, can remove him and diminish him.

This is the purpose of the chapter – to provide a backdrop for the display of God's mighty power.

This chapter has Moses and Aaron and Israel brought low and Pharaoh exalted in order that the Lord might be known and revealed.

The end result is that we will know that the hero of this story is not Moses but the Lord.

Some timeless patterns to observe

- God

Having said this, I want you to come with me and to notice some common patterns.

The patterns we see in this chapter have been seen before in the Bible.

And they will be seen time and time again in the Bible.

They are timeless patterns.

First, I want to start with the patterns we see here with God.

In this chapter we see a God who has spoken his word but not yet acted upon it as we and Moses expected.

In other words, he is a God who does not appear to be DOING anything.

And this is the case even when his people are suffering terribly.

He is the God who holds back...

Who waits...

And who does things we can't comprehend.

Now, if you haven't met this side of God yet, then let me tell you that there is every chance that you will at some point in your life.

At some point in your life you will be convinced about God's will in some area.

And you will wait for it and wait for it and wait for it.

And you will search for God on the topic.

And he will seem distant and silent.

You will want to accuse him and you will be tempted to abandon him.

However, such passages as these ones tell us that he knows what he is doing.

He has a plan.

He has a purpose.

And he has his own way of doing things.

It may not be our way.

But he will so act in the world that his word is kept.

For he has staked his reputation on his word.

He is not a liar.

He gives no deceptive words.

He speaks and it is true.

He is the Lord of his word.

- Moses

The second pattern I want you to notice is the pattern we see in Moses.

Moses is clearly presented as God's prophet.

He stands in God's place and speaks God's word.

But it is not all smooth sailing.

After all, the person to whom the prophecy is directed doesn't listen.

The people he represents don't appreciate what he does.

And God doesn't respond as expected.

The end result is that he is on the receiving end from both Pharaoh and the people.

He is caught between all parties and the God he represents.

The role of the prophet is a tough job.

It is one of hardship and difficulty and unpredictability.

It often ends in suffering or death.

This was the life of the prophet in the Old Testament.

This is the life of the prophet in the New Testament.

And it is the role of all who are given God's word to speak.

And God's word today to all of us who are engaged in a ministry of the word is that the word God has given us to speak will often be one that our hearers would prefer not to hear.

God's word for us today is that the pattern we see here in Exodus 5 will often be the one we experience.

For not everyone to whom we speak God's word will want to hear.

Some people to whom we speak God's word will oppose it without mercy.

Even some of God's people will not appreciate what we say.

And sometimes God will not respond in ways we expect despite our faithfulness to our calling.

At other times we may often find ourselves sandwiched between God, the people God wants to speak to, and God's people.

Our ministry of the word may often bring hardship and suffering and sometimes even ostracism and death.

At times, we may even want to accuse God of wrongdoing.

However, God knows what he is doing.

As his word goes out from our mouths it goes with the power of his Spirit.

It does what he wants it to do.

And our task is not to make it happen.

Our task is to faithfully speak God's word.

Our task is to faithfully live God's word.

Our task is to trust the God whose word it is.

- The people

There are other patterns to notice here.

Did you notice the people of God in this story?

They are the slaves who work at the brick kilns.

They are the ones who gather the straw.

They are the ones caught in the crossfire.

And life is not always easy for them to understand.

And so it has often been for the people of God.

For as the people of God attempt to live lives for God they often find themselves caught up in conflicts that are much bigger than them.

Like Job, they often can't see behind the scenes and understand what is going on.

But like Job, they are to continue to trust that God knows what he is doing and that right will eventually triumph.

And often, they will not see the end of the conflict in their own lifetime.

For me, this is one of the great difficulties of living the Christian life.

The difficulty of not really knowing what is going on.

The difficulty of being caught in the crossfire.

The difficulty of making sense out of God and his purposes in today's situation.

And in this situation I often have no recourse but to cry out to the God who hears and remembers.

And at times I will often simply have to trust that he knows.

I will simply have to cling to the sure and certain knowledge that he has loved me in Jesus.

- Pharaoh

However, I don't want to finish there.

After all, I have indicated that I think the focus of this chapter is Pharaoh.

Well, I think that Pharaoh is also a pattern.

He is a pattern of antiGod and antiChrist forces in this world.

Pharaoh here is one who speaks and lives as a person who does not know God and does not want to know God.

He is merely interested in his own plans and his own place in the world.

He will do anything to anyone in order to get these plans fulfilled.

And if God stands in his way...

If the people of God stand in his way...

Then he will oppose the people of God.

And he will take on God himself.

He will demand that God bows before his will.

And he will demand that God's people give him their allegiance rather than giving it to God.

In other words, he seeks to take the place of God in the world and among the people of God.

And such an attitude places him in direct confrontation with God.

And it is a confrontation that he will often seem to win.

Passages such as the books of Isaiah, and Daniel, and 2 Thessalonians, tell us that there have been many such people.

These passages also tell us that such people will often seem to win.

They will often persecute the people of God and seem to get away with it.

They will often kill the people of God and seem to get away scott free.

Such agents of chaos, such antichrists, are at work in our world today.

In some places their hands are filled with Pharoah's weapons of physical torture and murder.

In other places their hands are filled with legal weapons that restrict and confine.

And in even other places, their hands are filled with theological weapons which confound and deceive.

So, what do we think and do in the face of such agents of evil?

Well, the New Testament points us in a number of directions.

First, we should know that God will judge.

In 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2, Paul tells us that the day will come when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven.

On that day he will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

And he will bring relief to his people who are afflicted and suffering.

And they will marvel at him in his presence among all his people.

Second, we should be determined to stand fast.

We have been chosen by God to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So let us not side with those opposed to God and his purposes.

Let us not cave in to their temporary power.

Rather, let's determine to stand firm and hold on to Christ and the traditions that have been taught to us by God through his apostles.

And may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort our hearts and the hearts of our suffering brethren throughout the world.

And may he establish us all in every good work and word while we wait for his Son from heaven.