

God Is Able

Exodus 5–6

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Perceptual Blindness

There is a well-known psychology experiment called the “Monkey Business Illusion.” Viewers are asked to watch a short video of people passing a basketball and count the number of passes made by those wearing white. It sounds simple enough. But when the video ends and the question is asked — did you see the gorilla? — a significant portion of the audience is stunned. They missed it entirely. Not only that, they also failed to notice that one of the players left the screen and that the background curtain changed color. They were so focused on counting passes that they were blind to everything else happening right in front of them.

I confess to you this morning that I have suffered that same kind of perceptual blindness with our Scripture text. When I was planning this walk through Exodus, I intended to move quickly through chapters five and six. I saw them as little more than a preamble to the plagues — a bit of narrative scaffolding before the dramatic confrontations, the Passover, and the great going-out of the people from Egypt. What I missed, in all my years of reading this text, is that these two chapters are not scaffolding at all. They are a wonderful, powerful description and proclamation of salvation. The gorilla was right there on the screen, and I had been counting passes.

The Story So Far

To understand what is happening in Exodus 5 and 6, we need to remember where we have been. The people of Israel have been in Egypt for four hundred years. A generation arose that did not know Joseph, and under that new regime the Israelites became slaves. Into that suffering, God broke in with a call. Moses encountered God at the burning bush — the God who is present, who knows the suffering of his people, and who commissions a deliverer. God told Moses exactly what was going to happen, step by step.

By the end of chapter four, Moses has obeyed. He goes down to Egypt as the Lord directed. He meets Aaron along the way. They gather the elders of Israel, and the people respond with

hearts of worship. Everything the Lord said has proven true. It is, by any measure, a promising beginning.

The Weight of Oppression

Encouraged by all of this, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh — and they go with what sounds like confidence, perhaps even expecting that this ruler of Egypt will be easily moved. We read of this encounter in Exodus 5:1–2:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”

Pharaoh’s response is essentially this: *Who is this God, and I do not particularly care.* Of all the questions Pharaoh asks in the book of Exodus, this may be the one he most comes to regret. He is going to find out who the Lord is. That, in fact, is one of the primary purposes of the entire book — the revealing of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Moses and Aaron press the point. The God of the Hebrews has met with us, they insist; allow us to go and worship. But Pharaoh dismisses them. You are lazy, he says. You want time off. You are causing problems. And in response, he tightens the grip. The Israelites must continue producing the same quota of bricks, but now they must gather their own straw.

From verse six to the end of chapter five, we read a detailed account of what follows. It is a passage that describes oppression and evil at work — a life lived under the heel of power. The Israelites cannot make their quota under these new conditions, and the consequences fall hard.

What is striking about this section is how it is organized around a single question: *who is to blame?* The taskmasters beat the Israelite foremen. The foremen go to Pharaoh and point at the taskmasters. Pharaoh turns it back on the people themselves, calling them idle. When the foremen leave Pharaoh’s court and encounter Moses and Aaron, they turn their anger on 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 finally Moses, overwhelmed and bewildered, turns to God:

“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.”

Everyone gets blamed — the taskmasters, the people, the foremen, Moses and Aaron, and finally God himself. Moses ascribes evil to the Lord. *This is your fault.* The only person who escapes blame in this entire downward spiral is the one person who is actually responsible: Pharaoh. Somehow, none of this is his fault.

The passage describes a system of oppression with a recognizable logic. Those at the top benefit from the labor of the many. Those at the bottom are exhausted, powerless, without the capacity to mount any organized resistance. Any petition or demand is dismissed out of hand, and the only result of asking is that the grip tightens. The oppressed are made to understand that their well-being depends entirely on the goodwill of those above them. Don't disturb the system. Things cannot be better than they are. And those who try to help are, in fact, only making matters worse. There is no way out of this life of drudgery, duty, bondage, and slavery.

That is where chapter five ends.

God Is Able to Deliver

Then chapter six opens, and God responds.

The very first words set the tone: *“Now you shall see what I will do.”* Whatever Moses expected, whatever the people feared, God declares that the story is not over — and that what comes next belongs to him. His response to their suffering unfolds in a series of extraordinary promises, gathered in verses six through eight:

“I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.”

I want to slow down here, because this is where I had my perceptual blindness — and where I believe many of us do too. Look at what God is promising.

First: I will bring you out from under the burden. The weight of oppression, the crushing load — God says he is able to lift it. Not manage it. Not reduce it somewhat. *Bring you out from under it.*

Second: I will deliver you and redeem you. These are the great words of salvation — liberation from bondage, purchased at great cost.

Third: I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God. Deliverance is not an end in itself. God is not simply removing the Israelites from a bad situation and leaving them to fend for themselves. He is saving them *to himself*. He is the object and the destination of their rescue.

Fourth: You shall know that I am the LORD. Part of God's plan includes knowledge of himself — not merely facts about him, but the kind of deep, relational, soul-level knowledge that comes through experience. The exodus is not only a redemption from bondage; it is a stepping into relationship with the living God.

Fifth: I will bring you home. The promise of the land is not a footnote. It is the culmination. God ties his plan all the way back to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His people will not wander forever. He will bring them home.

This is the part I had glanced past in my preparation. These bullet points, as I initially thought of them, are not administrative details. They are the grammar of salvation. And here is what arrested me in my study: this salvation plan is not merely the story of Israel in Egypt. It is our story.

Our Pharaoh Has a Different Name

God is able to deliver you. The words spoken here in Exodus 6 are words spoken to us.

There are many Pharaohs in life that crush and diminish human beings. But perhaps the harshest and most relentless of all is sin. Sin is an oppressive taskmaster. It is destructive. It is life-stealing. It works by the same terrible logic we saw in chapter five: it tightens its grip the more you struggle, it makes those who try to help seem like they are only making things worse, and it insists that there is no real freedom — only management, adjustment, survival.

In a great deal of Christian teaching, sin gets reduced to a legal category — an offense against God for which a legal penalty must be paid. Christ pays that penalty, the ledger is balanced, heaven is opened. That framework is not wrong, but it is profoundly incomplete, and I want to say plainly: as a full account of sin and salvation, it is shallow and dysfunctional. Yes, sin is an offense against a holy God. Yes, Christ's death is the just and sufficient payment for that offense. But sin is *also* a bondage — a power that enslaves, degrades, and destroys human life

here and now. And God's salvation addresses that bondage too, not only at the moment of death, but today.

That message of freedom from the power of sin is not being heard clearly in many churches. Too many Christians are practicing perceptual blindness about it. And because of that blindness, they remain under the yoke.

The Pharaohs of our lives go by different names than they did in Egypt. They are called pornography, greed, a spirit of perpetual discontent. They are called prejudice, hatred, the abuse of our bodies through addiction and overindulgence. They are called bitterness, unresolved anger, grudges carried for years. They are called the need to control, the inability to forgive, the corrosive self-centeredness that poisons relationships. The list is long, and most of us know our own entry on it.

Under the grip of these things, life feels exactly like what chapter five describes. Sin's hold feels iron-tight. Every attempt to break free seems to make things worse. There is no real freedom in sight — only management, guilt, and the grinding sense that this is simply the way things are.

And it is precisely here that God speaks.

I am able to bring you out from under that burden. I am able to deliver you. I am able to redeem you — with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.

We on this side of the cross understand what those great acts of judgment are. The cross is the central act of judgment — the place where everything that is wrong is rendered its verdict, and where the legal account between God and humanity is set right. But God's work did not end two thousand years ago. He is at work today, in your life, delivering you from the very power of sin — not merely its consequence, but its grip.

And his work does not stop at deliverance. He saves you to himself. He is the destination. He says, *I will be your God, and you will be my people* — and in that relationship, something begins to happen that no legal transaction alone can produce.

The Apostle Peter puts it this way in his second letter:

“Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”

Peter is not talking about accumulating theological information. He is talking about that deep, personal, soul-level knowledge of God — relational knowledge that transforms us from the inside out. We are changed not by knowing *about* God but by knowing *him*.

And finally, God promises to bring us home.

This world is beautiful. It is declared good by its Maker. We are called to be stewards of it, to seek justice in it, to fight for life within it, and to pursue God's will here. But this world is not our home. There is a sense in which this entire life is something like a mission trip — a season of focused work and holy purpose, of living differently and drawing closer to our teammates, all of it oriented toward the day when we are brought to the place prepared for us. God's salvation includes that final homecoming. He swore it to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob — and he has not forgotten the promise.

Are You Blind to It?

Our passage does not end with God's declaration. It continues into verse nine:

Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.

The people were blind and deaf to God's outstretched arm — not because they were wicked, but because they were broken. The weight of what they had endured had so crushed their spirits that they could not hear the word of promise. They had perceptual blindness born of exhaustion and despair.

But the text also shows us another kind of blindness — a hardness of heart. In the opening verses of chapter seven, God tells Moses that Pharaoh will not listen, that his heart will be hardened. There is much to say about that, and we will go deeper into it in a future study. But the spiritual reality it points to is clear enough: when a person persistently turns away from God — *who is this God and why should I care?* — there is a downward trajectory. When someone consciously, willfully, knowingly continues in sin — or knowingly refuses what God is asking — a hardness of heart develops. That hardening is both a consequence of choices already made and a condition that makes further choices harder still. It is a solemn spiritual reality.

And so the text presents us with two kinds of people who could not receive what God was offering: those whose spirits were crushed by suffering, and those whose hearts had grown hard through persistent rejection of God.

The question for this morning is not about the ancient world. It is about you. Are you blind to God's purposes for your life — to his outstretched arm, to his salvation? Are you blind to his deliverance from sin, to his invitation into relationship, to his eternal purpose for you?

If you are struggling to see, it may be worth asking which kind of blindness has taken hold. Are you beaten down — overwhelmed by the weight of circumstances, too exhausted and broken to lift your eyes? Or has something harder settled in — a pattern of turning away, of choosing your way over his, until the voice of God has grown faint?

In either case, the word of the Lord has not changed. *Now you shall see what I will do.*

He is able.