

Moses' Changed Heart

Exodus 4–6

January 23, 2019

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Review: Four Hundred Years and a Burning Bush

Before we enter tonight's passage, it is worth pausing over an archaeological moment that illuminates one of the most concrete details in these chapters — the making of bricks without straw.

Egyptian documents and archaeological evidence confirm in striking detail the labor practices described in Exodus 5. Sun-dried mud bricks were a primary building material throughout ancient Egypt, and chopped straw was a critical binding agent in their production — not merely filler, but structural. Without straw, the clay loses cohesion and the bricks crumble. We also possess ancient Egyptian administrative records, including papyri that track daily brick quotas assigned to labor gangs, and records of workers being disciplined for failing to meet those quotas. The foremen, the taskmasters, the quotas, the beatings — all of it maps precisely onto what we know of Egyptian labor organization in the New Kingdom period. When the author of Exodus describes this world, he is not composing legend. He is writing from the inside of a world he knows.

With that in mind, let us situate ourselves in the story.

Four hundred years have passed since Jacob's family descended into Egypt. A people have been born in bondage, and they have never known freedom. Into this world Moses is born, drawn from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, raised in the Egyptian court, and then exiled to Midian after killing an Egyptian taskmaster. For forty years he has lived as a stranger in a foreign land, tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro, a priest of Midian.

And then God speaks from a burning bush.

The Meeting Between Moses and God (Exodus 3:1–4:17)

What happens between Exodus 3:1 and 4:17 is one of the most remarkable conversations in all of Scripture. God appears to Moses and says plainly what he intends to do:

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:7–8)

God does not stop there. He lays out the entire plan. Moses is to go to Pharaoh with the elders of Israel and request three days in the wilderness to worship. Pharaoh will refuse — God tells Moses this plainly in advance — but that refusal will become the occasion for great wonders, so that all of Egypt will know that the God of Israel is Lord. And in the end, Pharaoh will relent, and the Egyptians will send Israel out laden with silver and gold.

Moses’ response to this extraordinary announcement is not worship. It is not gratitude. It is a series of objections.

Who am I, that I should go? God answers: I will be with you. *Who are you, that I should say sent me?* God answers: I AM WHO I AM — the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. *But they will not believe me.* God answers by giving Moses three signs: a staff that becomes a serpent, a hand that becomes leprous as snow and is restored, water from the Nile that becomes blood on dry ground. *But I am not a man of words — I am slow of speech.* God answers: Who made the mouth? I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say.

And then Moses says what he has been working up to all along: *Please, Lord, send someone else.*

At this, the text tells us, the anger of the Lord was kindled. But even in his anger, God is patient. He tells Moses that Aaron, his brother the Levite, will speak for him. Moses will have the word; Aaron will be the voice. The staff is still in Moses’ hand. Now go.

What is striking about this entire exchange is not only Moses’ fear, but the nature of his relationship — or rather, the absence of one. He does not build an altar. He shares no meal with God. He offers no blessing, no thanksgiving. He does not call on the Lord by name in prayer. He asks permission to leave from his father-in-law, a Midian priest, before setting out for Egypt. And on the road, a strange and troubling episode involving Zipporah and the circumcision of their son raises the question that runs beneath the whole opening section of Exodus: who exactly is Moses? Is he Egyptian? Midianite? Hebrew? His identity is unresolved, and that unresolved identity is part of what makes him an uncertain instrument.

I highlight all of this because the central movement of our passage tonight — from the end of chapter 4 through the beginning of chapter 7 — is not primarily a story about Pharaoh’s stubbornness or Israel’s suffering. It is a story about what happens inside Moses. God does not change in these chapters. His word does not change. His purpose does not change. But Moses does. And before God does his great work through Moses, it is Moses who must first be changed.

We want to see change in the world. But perhaps it begins here.

A Series of Meetings and Blame (Exodus 4:27–5:21)

The narrative of this section is structured around a cascade of meetings, each one moving the disaster further down the chain until it lands at Moses' feet.

The first meeting is between Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. Aaron has been sent out to meet his brother by the Lord himself, and when they meet at the mountain of God, Moses tells Aaron everything — all the words of the Lord, all the signs he has been given. This is the first time Moses has spoken the Lord's message aloud to another human being.

The second meeting is between Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel. Aaron does the speaking — Moses is present but silent, a telling detail — and the elders respond with a faith that puts Moses to shame:

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. (Exodus 4:31)

They believed. They bowed. They worshiped. Already the people of Israel have done something Moses has not yet done. And this, I want to suggest, is the contrast the narrator wants us to feel as we enter the next two chapters.

The third meeting is the confrontation with Pharaoh. Moses and Aaron appear before him with a straightforward request:

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” (Exodus 5:1)

It is worth noting that this request was not, in its ancient context, either radical or unreasonable. Egyptian records document religious holidays and festivals during which labor was suspended so that workers could participate in sacrifices and celebrations to their gods. This was a recognized feature of ancient Egyptian life. Moses is not yet demanding liberation. He is making a culturally intelligible request — which makes Pharaoh's response all the more revealing. *Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.* The hardness of Pharaoh's heart is on display from the very first exchange, and it is a hardness that exceeds even what the customs of his own culture would require.

The consequences come swiftly. Pharaoh commands the taskmasters and foremen to stop supplying straw for bricks while keeping the daily quota unchanged. The people are scattered

across Egypt to gather stubble wherever they can find it. The foremen — Israelites themselves, men who had been spared the harshest labor — are now beaten for failing to meet quotas that cannot humanly be met.

The foremen go to Pharaoh and plead their case, and Pharaoh dismisses them with contempt. As they come out from Pharaoh's presence, they find Moses and Aaron waiting for them. That detail — that Moses and Aaron were waiting — is worth sitting with. If they truly believed that God was going to deliver his people, what exactly were they waiting for? The sight of them, standing there while the people suffer for their petition, provokes a curse from the foremen that falls like a hammer:

“*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.*” (Exodus 5:21)

Moses and Aaron have been cursed. Whatever they expected when they went to Pharaoh, it was not this.

Moses Turns to the Lord (Exodus 5:22–6:13)

And now something happens that has not happened before in the entire story of Moses' call.

“*Then Moses turned to the LORD.*” (Exodus 5:22)

This is the first time Moses turns to the Lord. He has turned to Jethro. He has turned to Aaron. He has managed signs and messaged elders and stood before Pharaoh. But this is the first time he turns to God.

And he does not come with polished words. He comes with accusation:

“*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.*” (Exodus 5:22–23)

Moses accuses God of doing evil. He accuses God of wasting his life. He accuses God of failing to keep his promises. These are not small complaints. They are the words of a man in anguish, stripped of every layer of composure, standing before God with nothing left but his grief and his anger.

What do you expect God to do with that?

What God does not do is condemn Moses. He does not rebuke him for lack of faith. He does not warn him about the danger of accusation. In fact, it is precisely because Moses has turned to the Lord — even in anger, even with blame on his lips — that the Lord says: *now* it is time.

This pattern is not unique to Moses. It runs through the Psalms like a thread. The psalmist goes to God to complain — about the injustice of the world, about the prosperity of the wicked, about the silence of heaven — and in that very act of turning toward God with raw honesty, something shifts. The heart is changed not by getting what it asked for, but by the act of address itself. What God wants is not a performance of faith. He wants you — the actual you, with the actual questions, carrying the actual weight of your actual life.

God's response to Moses contains nothing new. The message is identical to what he said at the burning bush. But now, for the first time, Moses can hear it:

“I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant.” (Exodus 6:2–5)

And then God speaks in a series of declarations that form one of the most concentrated images of salvation in all of the Old Testament:

“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.” (Exodus 6:6–8)

Notice who is the subject of every verb. *I will bring. I will deliver. I will redeem. I will take. I will be. I will bring you in.* God does not delegate the work of salvation. He does not manage it from a distance. He accomplishes it himself.

And then verse 9 gives us one more sign of what has changed in Moses:

| Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel.

The last time someone addressed the people, it was Aaron. Moses stood by. But something has changed in him, and now it is Moses who speaks. The change in Moses does not yet produce

the result he hopes for — the people cannot hear him, crushed as they are by broken spirit and brutal labor — but the change in Moses is real.

An Image of Salvation (Exodus 6:1–8)

I want to draw out three truths from this passage that form a coherent picture of what salvation means — not only for Israel in Egypt, but for us in Christ.

First, salvation from bondage begins with God and is accomplished by God. The sevenfold repetition of *I will* is not rhetorical flourish. It is theological declaration. God does not assist Israel in freeing themselves. He does not provide conditions under which liberation becomes possible if Israel meets certain requirements. He acts. He brings. He delivers. He redeems. The initiative is entirely his. This is not a partnership of equals. It is rescue.

Second, salvation is a covenantal relationship. The language of verse 7 is the language of covenant: *I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God*. It echoes the structure of a marriage vow. This is not freedom in the sense of being released into an open field with no obligations and no ties. A bird released from a cage is free, but it is also alone and without shelter. The freedom God offers Israel is the freedom of belonging — of being brought into a relationship that is defined by mutual fidelity, where the God who is Lord of heaven commits himself to this particular people in covenant love. It is within that covenant, not outside of it, that Israel will be most free. We will return to this in depth when we reach Sinai.

Third, salvation is being brought home. *I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*. Redemption has a destination. It moves from one house to another. It is not merely liberation from slavery; it is arrival at an inheritance. God's purposes do not end with the crossing of the Red Sea. They end — or rather, they begin — with a people settled in the land of promise, in the place where God dwells among them.

All three of these are true for us in Jesus Christ. Salvation begins with God and is accomplished by him — redeemed with an outstretched arm, at the cost of the cross. It is a covenantal relationship — we are his people, and he is our God, sealed in the blood of the new covenant. And it is being brought home — to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for those who are kept by the power of God.

These are the things Moses spoke to the people of Israel.

Moses and the Uncircumcised Lips (Exodus 6:12–7:7)

There is one final movement before our passage closes. Moses has been changed — but he is not yet finished. When the people cannot hear him, he turns back to God with a familiar objection: *Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?*

The language has shifted. Earlier Moses complained that he was slow of speech. Now he speaks of uncircumcised lips — something unclean, unfit, unfruitful. I think what we are seeing is a Moses who now believes God, but has not yet come to believe in himself as God's instrument. The doubt has turned inward. That is a different problem than before, and perhaps a less dangerous one. A man who doubts his own adequacy but trusts in God is in a better position than a man who doubts both.

God's answer is patient and direct:

“See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.” (Exodus 7:1–5)

And then: *Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them.* Moses was eighty years old. Aaron was eighty-three. And they went to Pharaoh.

Closing

The movement we have traced tonight is not a movement in God. God does not change between Exodus 3 and Exodus 7. He says the same thing at the burning bush that he says after the curse of the foremen. What changes is Moses — and what changes him is not a vision, not a sign, not a display of power. What changes him is a moment of honest, desperate, accusatory prayer. He turns to the Lord with his anger and his grief and his sense of betrayal, and in that turning, the Lord meets him.

Perhaps there is someone here tonight who has been managing their faith rather than living it — going through the motions, delegating the hard conversations to someone else, keeping a

careful distance from the God you are not sure you trust. Moses' story suggests that the Lord is not waiting for you to have it together before he meets you. He is waiting for you to turn.

Turn, and he will meet you. He always has.