

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Exodus

By Ken Miller

WEEK 3 READING



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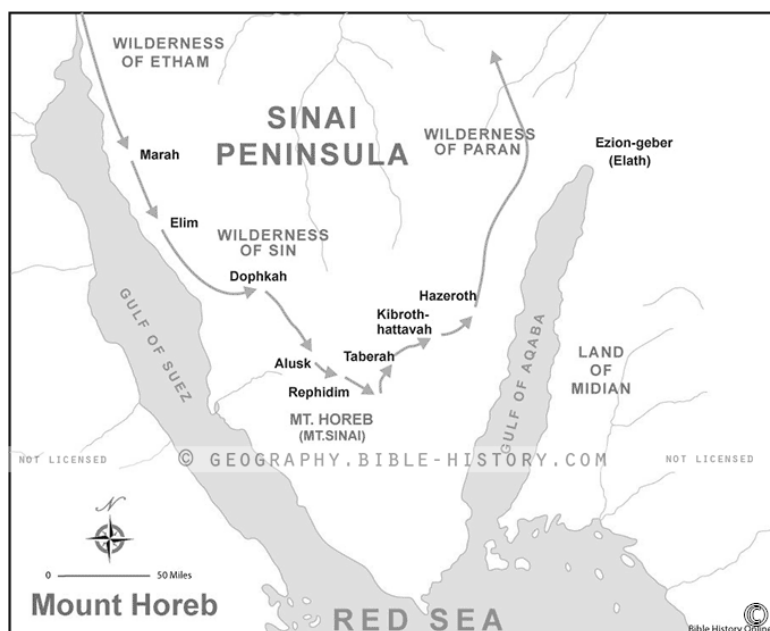
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Who Am I and the Great I Am

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the Lord said, "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, ⁸ 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, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." – Exodus 3:1-12 ESV



Moses is living in the land of Midian, on the far side of the Gulf of Aqaba. He has married a daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and settled into his new life as a husband, father, and sheep herder. Moses has experienced a great deal of change since leaving Egypt. Long gone are the fine clothes and gourmet meals served in regal splendor in the Pharaoh's palace. He was once a member of the royal family, but now he is a murderer and a fugitive from justice. He finds himself living on the lam in a distant land and

relegated to the lowly role of a common shepherd. Safely ensconced hundreds of miles away

from the scene of his crime, Moses is oblivious to all that is taking place back in Egypt. He has no way of knowing that, in his absence, the suffering of his fellow Hebrews has increased significantly. He may be living in relative peace and security, but they are not.

...the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. – Exodus 2:23 NLT

It's interesting to note that Moses, the author of the book of Exodus, penned these words long after the events took place. Somewhere between the exodus of the people from Egypt and their arrival in the land of Canaan, God inspired Moses to record all the events that led up to his calling as God's deliverer. He is writing from a different vantage point which enables him to look back with clarity and see how the hand of God was orchestrating every phase of his life.

While he was living in Midian, he had no concept of the difficult circumstances under which his parents, siblings, and fellow Israelites were being forced to endure. In retrospect, he writes that they were suffering so greatly that they cried out for help. They were desperately praying for someone to deliver them from their pain and misery. And he states that "their cry rose up to God" (Exodus 2:23 NLT).

God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act. – Exodus 2:24-25 NLT

Moses was oblivious, but God was not. Moses was ignorant of their plight, but God was fully aware. Moses could not hear their cries, but God not only heard, but He decided to do something about it. It was time to act.

And what Moses didn't realize at the time, was that he was going to play a major role in God's unfolding drama of deliverance.

At the same time that God heard the cries of His people, He made a surprise visit to Moses. Unhindered by time or space, God was able to hear and act. But this does not mean that God was reacting to what He heard. He was responding as if He had just become aware of the Israelites' plight. He had known all along that they would suffer, and He already had a plan and an appointed time in which He would act.

Centuries earlier, God had told broken the news to Abraham that his descendants would one day end up living in a foreign land as slaves.

"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years." – Genesis 15:13 ESV

This prophecy had a timeline attached to it, and the end date had come. Four hundred years had passed, which meant it was time to implement the second phase of His promise.

“But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.” – Genesis 15:14 ESV

The persecution of the Israelites was about to end, and the judgment of the Egyptians was about to begin. But before any of that could happen, God needed to notify the one He was going to use to bring it all about, and that happened to be Moses.

The scene for this divine encounter was a place called Mount Horeb, located in the southern region of the Sinai Peninsula. It lies opposite the land of Midian, on the other side of the Gulf of Aqaba. The memory of that life-altering day has been seared into Moses’ brain. Writing in the third person, Moses vividly recalls exactly what he was doing when God showed up.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. – Exodus 3:1 ESV

His reference to Horeb as “the mountain of God” is a hint that the much older and wiser Moses is the one recording this story. The Moses shepherding sheep near the base of Horeb would have had no reason to see this particular mountain as holy or associated with Jehovah. It was just another mountain in the middle of the wilderness of Sinai. But Moses, the author, is hinting that this place is about to become a sacred spot in his life and that of the people of Israel, Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai would become the place where God revealed Himself to His chosen people, and it would begin with Moses.

Moses, the shepherd, suddenly stumbles upon a startling scene.

...the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. – Exodus 3:2 ESV

It seems that Moses saw the bush before he ever saw the angel of the Lord. He came upon this flame-engulfed shrub and noticed that it kept on burning as if fueled by some outside source. The brittle branches of the bush were not consumed by the heat of the fire, and Moses was forced to take a closer look. And as Moses stepped forward, God spoke up.

“Moses! Moses!...Do not come any closer...Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.” – Exodus 3:4-5 NLT

Moses was stunned to hear a voice emanating from the middle of the burning bush. It completely caught him off guard. And then he received a second and even more discomfoting shock when the disembodied voice introduced itself.

“I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” – Exodus 3:6 NLT

And recalling that incredible moment, Moses records that he “covered his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6 NLT). It can’t be ignored that Moses knew he was a murderer, and to find himself standing before the holy and wholly righteous God of his ancestors must have left him in paralyzing fear. He was in the presence of God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. He was under the gaze of the judge of the universe, and he stood condemned before Him. But God was not there to condemn Moses; He was there to call him.

“I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land.” – Exodus 3:7-8 NLT

For the first time since leaving Egypt, Moses receives an update concerning the situation back home, and it came from the lips of God Himself. The Lord wanted Moses to know that things were not going well but that He already had a plan in place that would guarantee not only their deliverance but the inheritance of their own homeland. Moses would have been familiar with the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He probably heard his birthmother tell of God’s covenant promises regarding the land of Canaan. Now, God was assuring this displaced Hebrew that those promises were about to be fulfilled.

And just in case Moses isn’t quite sure what “fertile and spacious land” God is talking about, the Lord provides clarification.

“It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live.” – Exodus 3:8 NLT

In other words, the descendants of Jacob, who had arrived in Egypt 400 years earlier, were about to return to Canaan. They were going home. But for that to happen, God was going to need a deliverer/leader who could act as His representative. And what Moses didn’t realize at the time was that he was God’s choice.

“Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.” – Exodus 3:9-10 NLT

This news must have hit Moses like a brick to the forehead. What in the world was God thinking? Why would Jehovah choose a convicted murderer and the disinherited adoptive son of Pharaoh to lead His people? When Moses left Egypt, he was disliked by Egyptians and Hebrews alike. Yet, here was God issuing Moses a summons to enter His service. This was not an invitation to be accepted, but a call to be obeyed.

But Moses responded to God's call with a simple three-word statement: "Who am I?"

Moses knew exactly who he was. He was the son of Amram and Jochebed, two obscure Hebrews who had been forced to give up their son and watch him be raised by Egyptians. He was a well-read and sophisticated byproduct of the Egyptian educational system. He was a convicted murderer and a fugitive from justice. As far as he could tell, he broke every HR protocol for hiring effective leaders. He had no business standing before Pharaoh, especially with a bounty on his head. And he was the worst possible candidate for taking on the extraction of a disenfranchised and disheartened people group. But Moses was about to learn that arguing with God was both pointless and unproductive. His reluctance, disqualifying resume, and debilitating fear were irrelevant. God assured Moses:

"I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain." – Exodus 3:12 NLT

The problem had been revealed. The plan for its solution had been disclosed. And the person to implement it had been called. But Moses would prove to be a tough sell. "Who am I" had just had a personal encounter with the great "I am" and his life would never be the same.

I Am, Are You?

¹³ Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, ¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”’ ¹⁸ And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.’ ¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. ²¹ And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, ²² but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.” – Exodus 3:13-22 ESV

While shepherding his father-in-law’s flocks in the wilderness of Sinai, Moses had an unexpected visit from God. This divine manifestation took the form of a burning bush from which the voice of God declared His plan to deliver the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. But for Moses, the most shocking thing about this encounter was the part in which God revealed him to be the chosen deliverer.

“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” – Exodus 3:10 ESV

His immediate reaction was to disqualify himself from service.

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” – Exodus 3:11 ESV

The thought of going home to Egypt, where he was a convicted murderer with his name on Pharaoh’s most-wanted list, must have scared Moses to death. Despite being Pharaoh’s adopted grandson, he would no longer have any negotiating capital with the Egyptian monarch. He was persona non grata back home. Even his fellow Israelites would refuse to listen to this former member of the royal family, who was more Egyptian than Hebrew.

But God was not buying what Moses was selling. The Almighty refused to listen to his excuses. Instead, God assured Moses that he had no reason to fear because he would not be alone. God would be with him every step of the way. And God provided Moses with an ironclad guarantee that he and the emancipated Israelites would one day return to Mount Horeb (Sinai) and worship Him. And the miraculous burning bush was to be “the sign” that confirmed the veracity of God’s words. Moses could trust God.

God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through? – Deuteronomy 23:19 NLT

But Moses was still reluctant to accept God’s commission. He was not yet convinced that he was the right man for the assignment, so he asked, “If I go to the Israelites and tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’—what should I say to them?” (Exodus 3:13 NLT).

Moses knew that his people had long ago lost interest in Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. During their 400-year stint in Egypt, they had acclimated to the ways of their Egyptian hosts. In time, they had assimilated into the surrounding culture, adapting themselves to the local customs and even adopting the Egyptian gods as their own.

In the book of Ezekiel, God confirms that during their stay in Egypt, the Israelites had developed an unhealthy attachment to the false gods of Egypt.

“When I chose Israel—when I revealed myself to the descendants of Jacob in Egypt—I took a solemn oath that I, the Lord, would be their God. I took a solemn oath that day that I would bring them out of Egypt to a land I had discovered and explored for them—a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the best of all lands anywhere. Then I said to them, ‘Each of you, get rid of the vile images you are so obsessed with. Do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt, for I am the Lord your God.’” – Ezekiel 20:5-7 NLT

Having lived in Egypt most of his adult life, Moses was well aware of this problem and knew the people of Israel would be reluctant to obey the commands of a God they didn’t know. It didn’t help that there had been a 400-year period when God had seemed to go silent. Their increasing apostasy had led Him to cut off all communication with His people. But with His appearance at the burning bush, God broke that silence. Now, Moses was wanting to know how he was supposed to reintroduce this long-forgotten God to the people of Israel.

At this point, even Moses is unsure of his visitor’s identity. While he seems to know that he is conversing with a deity, he has no way of knowing that it is Jehovah, the God of his forefathers. So, he seeks a name, an appellation by which to identify the God to whom he is speaking. And God responds:

“I AM that I AM.” And he said, “You must say this to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” – Exodus 3:14 NLT

The answer Moses receives is not so much a name as it is a declaration of authority. God is declaring that He is the “existing one,” the eternal, all-powerful creator of heaven and earth. He is uncreated and has always existed. Unlike the gods of the Egyptians, God is not the byproduct of man’s imagination.

“I AM is the ultimate statement of self-sufficiency, self-existence, and immediate presence. God’s existence is not contingent upon anyone else. His plans are not contingent upon any circumstances. He promises that He will be what He will be; that is, He will be the eternally constant God. He stands, ever-present and unchangeable, completely sufficient in Himself to do what He wills to do and to accomplish what He wills to accomplish.” – <https://www.gotquestions.org/I-AM-WHO-I-AM-Exodus-3-14>

Moses is being sent by the one true God. And to ensure that Moses fully comprehends who it is that is speaking to him, God adds:

“You must say this to the Israelites, ‘The Lord—the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is my memorial from generation to generation.’” – Exodus 3:15 NLT

Moses is communicating with the very same God that his forefathers worshiped. The man who asked, “Who am I?” has been talking to the great “I am.” This self-doubting prince turned murderer turned shepherd had questioned his own identity and qualifications for service. But God provided Moses with the assurance that there was no reason to doubt His identity and qualifications. He was Jehovah God.

And with His identity fully disclosed, God instructs Moses to return to Egypt, gather the elders of Israel, and let them in on the news.

“Go and bring together the elders of Israel and tell them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, appeared to me—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—saying, “I have attended carefully to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt, and I have promised that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”’” – Exodus 3:16-17 NLT

This was great news, but it would have been difficult for Moses to comprehend. After four centuries of life in Egypt, would the people of Israel want to pack up and leave? Yes, things were difficult and they had been crying out because of their suffering and pain. But was a relocation what they had in mind? And how was Moses supposed to carry off this impossible mission? All of these thoughts must have rifled through the mind of Moses as he listened to God’s instructions.

But as Moses wrestled with doubts, God assured him that the elders would eventually listen to what he had to say. Then, having convinced the Israelites, Moses would need to turn his attention to Pharaoh, who would prove to be a challenge. God discloses that the Egyptian king will not allow the people of Israel to leave.

“I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, not even under force.” – Exodus 3:19
NLT

Moses was going to face strong opposition from his former adoptive grandfather. But God reveals that Pharaoh’s resistance is part of the plan. His refusal to cooperate will bring about God’s judgment.

“I will extend my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will do among them, and after that he will release you.” – Exodus 3:20 NLT

God was letting Moses know ahead of time that his assignment would not be easy, but it would eventually prove successful. So much so, that God assured Moses that not only will the Israelites leave Egypt, but they will do so with great wealth.

“I will grant this people favor with the Egyptians, so that when you depart you will not leave empty-handed. Every woman will ask her neighbor and the one who happens to be staying in her house for items of silver and gold and for clothing. You will put these articles on your sons and daughters—thus you will plunder Egypt!” – Exodus 3:21-22 NLT

Surrounded by bleating sheep and still staring at the burning bush, Moses’ head must have been spinning as he considered the words of Jehovah. It was all too good to be true. Not only that, it was all too impossible to even consider. He had grown up in Egypt. He had been raised in the royal court and knew what he was up against. The Egyptians were a powerful and proud people. They were not about to let millions of slaves walk away scot-free and loaded down with the riches of Egypt.

But God patiently endured Moses’ questions of concern and expressions of doubt. He wanted His deliverer to be fully on board with the plan and fully convinced of its ultimate success. So, that when the great “I Am” finally asked Moses if was ready, he would be able to say, “I am.”

Just Say, Yes!

¹ Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” ² The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” ³ And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. ⁴ But the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—⁵ “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” ⁶ Again, the Lord said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. ⁷ Then God said, “Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. ⁸ “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.” ⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

¹⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” ¹¹ Then the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” ¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” ¹³ But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” ¹⁴ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. ¹⁶ He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. ¹⁷ And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.” – Exodus 4:1-17 ESV

Moses has seen a burning bush, heard a disembodied voice, and been given a name to go with the source of that voice. By now, he is convinced that it is indeed Jehovah, “the existing one,” with whom he has been speaking, and he fully understands the parameters of the mission he has been given. All of that becomes clear from the very next words that come out of his mouth.

“...behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord [Jehovah] did not appear to you.’” – Exodus 4:1 ESV

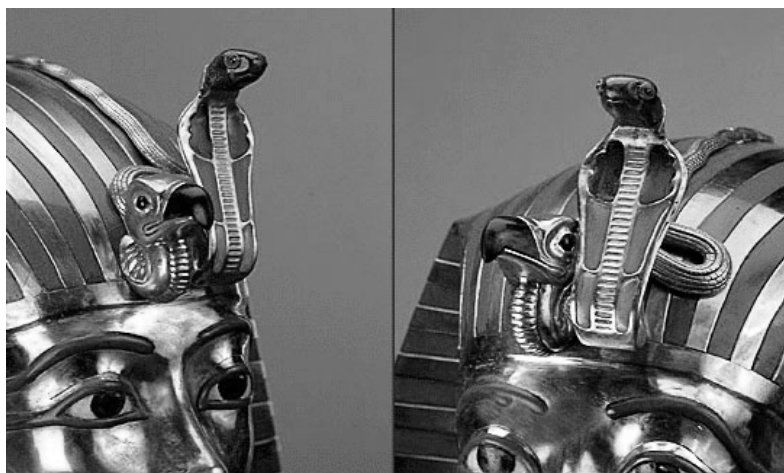
Moses understands that he is to return to his people in Egypt and give them a message from Jehovah, but he is unconvinced that this mission will succeed. Despite all of God’s assurances, Moses is reluctant to accept the assignment he has been given. There can be little doubt that fear is a primary factor behind Moses’ reticence. He knows that a return to Egypt, even after his lengthy absence, will be risky and potentially deadly. He has a bounty on his head for the

murder of an Egyptian, so returning to the scene of the crime doesn't seem like a particularly smart thing to do.

And it is apparent that Moses has strong doubts about his ability to win over his fellow Hebrews. After all, he had spent the majority of his life living in luxury within the walls of Pharaoh's palace. To the Israelites, Moses was a turncoat and a traitor. From their perspective, he had "slept" with the enemy and could not be trusted.

So, Moses steps up to the bar and pleads his case with the Almighty. This time, he argues that the Israelites will never believe that he has spoken with Jehovah. After all, no one has heard a word from the Lord for more than 400 years. During that extended period of silence, most of the Israelites had chosen to align themselves with one or more of the gods of Egypt. It was a common belief in those days that deities were regionally based. Their authority and sphere of influence were localized to a particular geographic area. The ancient pagan nations perceived each god or goddess as having a particular domain or sphere of power on the earth. They even assigned oversight of the different parts of that domain to different gods. So, there were gods of the forests, the crops, the mountains, the seas, and the rivers.

Moses feared that when he returned to Egypt declaring to have received a message from Jehovah, the Israelites would never believe him. Some would believe that Jehovah was somewhere back in Canaan and had forgotten all about them. Others would believe His power was limited and prove to be impotent in distant Egypt. Still, others would simply deem Moses a liar who never heard from Jehovah in the first place.



God listens patiently, then proceeds to assuage Moses' fears with a convincing demonstration of power that was also meant to foreshadow His judgment. God ordered Moses to throw down his shepherd's staff and, when he did, it was miraculously transformed into a snake. While it's likely that this powerful visual demonstration got Moses' attention, he may not have immediately recognized its

meaning. God was making an important point that was meant to convey His supreme authority as the one true God.

In Egyptian culture, the snake played an important role. The Uraeus ("rearing cobra") was the stylized form of an Egyptian cobra that graced the crown of the Pharaoh. Displayed with a flared neck and in an upright position as if preparing to strike, this symbolic image was meant to represent Pharaoh's sovereignty, royalty, and divine authority.

Whether he realized it or not, Moses was standing before a living symbol of Pharaoh's power and authority. And when God commanded Moses to pick up the snake by the tail, he must have had second thoughts. He didn't have to be a snake charmer to know that this tactic would probably not turn out well. But he obeyed. And when he did, the snake turned back into a shepherd's staff.

God immediately explained the meaning behind this powerful, yet petrifying demonstration. It was so "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you" (Exodus 4:5 ESV). Jehovah, the existing one, would declare His presence in Egypt by having His appointed messenger easily manipulate the serpent of Egypt (Pharaoh). Every time Moses performed this miracle, it would deliver a powerful message to the people of Israel.

*"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever,
to whom belong wisdom and might.
He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings..."* – Daniel 2:20-21 NLT

Jehovah was sovereign over all, including the Pharaoh who wore the symbol of a cobra on his crown. But Egypt's sovereign would prove to be no match for the sovereign God of the universe. The Israelites would know that the God of their forefathers was amongst them and their days of suffering at the hands of the Egyptians were coming to an end.

But God had one more thing to show Moses. This time, He ordered Moses to put his hand inside his cloak, and when Moses pulled it back out, he was shocked to find it covered in leprosy. While Moses, the author, doesn't divulge what went through his mind when this happened, it is safe to assume that he was not happy with the outcome. The very hand that had picked up the snake was now diseased and, therefore, unclean. I believe this particular sign was meant to deliver a personal message to Moses. He could refuse to answer God's call and continue hiding in Midian, but he would pay dearly for it. When this encounter with God was over, Moses would return to Midian ("Put your hand back inside your cloak"), but he would eventually obey and make his way to Egypt.

God was not issuing Moses an invitation to participate in His divine deliverance of the people of Israel. It was a command, and it was non-negotiable. In a sense, Moses had entered Midian as an unclean state. He had committed murder and was damaged goods. But his impurity would be removed, and he would become "the hand" of God, declaring the will of God to Pharaoh and the Israelites.

God informs Moses that these two signs were to be used to win over the people of Israel. But if they proved insufficient, Moses could use one more visual demonstration of God's power. He could take some water from the life-giving Nile and transform it into blood. This great river that sustained all life in the region would become a source and symbol of death. Once again, God was revealing to Moses His power and sovereignty over all things.

But even after these incredible displays of God’s power, Moses continued to balk at obeying God’s command. This time, he argued that he was unqualified for the role.

“O my Lord, I am not an eloquent man, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant, for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” – Exodus 4:10 NLT

In essence, Moses was telling God that He had chosen the wrong guy for the job. Moses begged God to reconsider and find someone else to take his place.

“O my Lord, please send anyone else whom you wish to send!” – Exodus 4:13 NLT

But God doesn’t make mistakes. He knew what He was doing and He would not take no for an answer. But He did make a concession. He agreed to give Moses an assistant, someone who could act as Moses’ mouthpiece before Pharaoh. But this was not a knee-jerk reaction or some kind of compromise on God’s part. It had all been planned ahead of time.

*“What about your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak very well. Moreover, **he is coming to meet you**, and when he sees you he will be glad in his heart.” – Exodus 4:14 NLT*

God had already arranged for Aaron to begin the long journey from Egypt to Midian, long before this conversation had begun. God had known in advance how this encounter with Moses was going to go, and God had always planned to have Aaron play a role in the deliverance of His people. And God told Moses exactly how this symbiotic relationship with his brother was going to work.

“So you are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And as for me, I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you both what you must do. He will speak for you to the people, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were his God. You will also take in your hand this staff, with which you will do the signs.” – Exodus 4:15-17 NLT

At this point, the discussion was over. Moses had nothing else to say. He had his assignment and had been given an assistant. Now all that was left to do was to make the long journey back to Egypt.

A Hard Heart is Not Difficult for God

¹⁸ Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

¹⁹ And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son,"²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" – Exodus 4:18-23 ESV

Moses finally determines to accept the Lord's commission and return to Egypt, but when he informs his father-in-law of his intentions, his words reflect a tone of pessimism.

"Let me go, so that I may return to my relatives in Egypt and see if they are still alive." – Exodus 4:18 NLT

It almost sounds as if Moses is expecting the worst when he returns. But it is more likely that he is trying to appeal to the heart of Jethro. After all, his father-in-law is a family man and will understand if Moses simply wants to return to check on the well-being of his relatives. This appeal will also help to convince Jethro to allow his daughter and two grandsons to make the journey back with Moses.

Having gained Jethro's permission, Moses made plans for the long journey home, but not before God informed him that it was safe to return.

"Go back to Egypt, because all the men who were seeking your life are dead." – Exodus 4:19 NLT

Evidently, Moses still harbored reservations about going back to the place where he had murdered an Egyptian in cold blood. As far as he knew, the bounty on his head was still in effect and he would be arrested as soon as he set foot in Egypt. But God graciously informed him that the statute of limitations had expired because all those who sought him were dead. Moses could no longer use that as an excuse for delaying his return.

Before Moses loaded his wife and sons on a donkey, he received one final order from God that fully summarized his commission.

"When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders I have put under your control. But I will harden his heart and he will not let the people go. You must say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord has said, 'Israel is my son, my firstborn, and I said

to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me,' but since you have refused to let him go, I will surely kill your son, your firstborn!'" – Exodus 4:21-23 NLT

Moses had his marching orders and they were far from encouraging. God basically told His servant that he would face stiff opposition. Pharaoh was not going to be like what Moses had to say. In fact, he was going to refuse any and all requests to let the people of Israel leave Egypt. And God let Moses know that Pharaoh's stubborn resistance would be part of His sovereign plan for Israel's deliverance. God was going to "harden his heart." This phrase will be used repeatedly throughout the book of Exodus, in order to inform the reader that the entire narrative arc of the story has been authored by God. Though Pharaoh is a powerful figure, he is just another character in God's divine drama of deliverance.

God is not suggesting that Pharaoh will be a helpless victim of His sovereign will. The king of Egypt will not be subjected to some kind of divine mind control that forces him to function in a robotic, trancelike state. Pharaoh will have full access to all of his mental faculties, and will willingly decide to oppose the will of God. On several occasions, it will become clear that Pharaoh is operating according to his own stubborn will.

*But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, **he hardened his heart** and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. – Exodus 8:15 ESV*

*But **Pharaoh hardened his heart** this time also, and did not let the people go. – Exodus 8:32 ESV*

In a sense, God is using the prideful and arrogant nature of Pharaoh to accomplish His will. God is not forcing Pharaoh to do anything. He is simply taking advantage of what He knows to be a weakness in the life of this godless, pagan king. By having Moses make the request for Israel's release, God is hardening Pharaoh's heart because He already knows the king will reject that request. God could soften Pharaoh's heart and make him amenable to Moses' overtures, but that would not provide the proper environment in which to demonstrate His power and authority to the people of Israel.

But it seems clear from the text that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

*But **the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses. – Exodus 9:12 ESV*

*But **the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**, and he did not let the people of Israel go. – Exodus 10:20 ESV*

*But **the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**, and he would not let them go. – Exodus 10:27 ESV*

Yet, once again, this seems to be an indication that God is allowing Pharaoh to operate according to his own moral compass. Pharaoh was simply doing what he would normally and naturally do, without any interference from God. Without God's assistance, Pharaoh would be incapable of responding any other way. In that sense, God hardened Pharaoh's heart by refusing to intervene. God could have provided Pharaoh with the capacity to behave in contrast to his normal, sinful disposition, but that would not have accomplished the plan for Israel's release.

No man or woman can display heart-motivated behavior in keeping with God's will without God's help. In the book of Ezekiel, God informs His own chosen people that their ability to obey His laws and statutes will be impossible until He has given them the ability to do so. But one day, He will do just that.

"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." – Ezekiel 36:26-27 ESV

The book of 1 Samuel recalls a scene in which the Philistines had stolen the Ark of the Covenant from Israel. This sacred object was integral to Israel's worship of Yahweh because it contained the mercy seat, where God's glory dwelt. To convince the Philistines to return the ark, God "terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory." (1 Samuel 5:6 ESV). In a panic, the people of Ashdod shipped the ark to the nearby city of Gath, "But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them" (1 Samuel 5:9 ESV).

Like a real-life game of hot potato, the Gathites sent the ark to another neighboring Philistine city. But when it arrived in Ekron, the same thing happened.

...there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven. – 1 Samuel 5:11-12 ESV

In a heightened state of panic, the Philistines sought the wisdom of their priests and diviners, hoping for a solution to their growing problem. Their advice was to send the ark back to Israel. Then they added this interesting word of warning.

"Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed?" – 1 Samuel 6:6 ESV

The report of God's long-past dealings with Pharaoh and the Egyptian people had become legendary. And these pagan priests warned their people not to follow their example. Because the God of the Israelites would eventually get His way.

In his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul uses the story of Exodus as a lesson on God's sovereign will. His main point is that God never operates unjustly. All that He does is good, righteous, and in order to accomplish His divine will. God can sovereignly choose to show mercy on whom He wills. It is not based on man's merit or effort. And then Paul uses Pharaoh as an example.

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. – Romans 9:17-18 ESV

He actually borrows from the book of Exodus, quoting the words that Yahweh had Moses deliver to Pharaoh.

"...by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go." – Exodus 9:15-16 ESV

This helps to explain what God told Moses just before he made the trip back to Egypt. The mission on which Moses was about to embark, was going to be difficult, but its outcome was set in stone. Pharaoh was going to be a tough negotiator, but God was well aware of that. He had planned on it. This particular Pharaoh was just the kind of man God needed on the throne of Egypt because he would prove to be just stubborn enough to reject all of Moses' requests and God's judgments. And while God could have destroyed the Egyptians in a heartbeat, He had chosen instead to use Pharaoh's stubbornness as a means for showcasing His power and sovereignty to the people of Israel. After what appeared to be a 400-year absence, God was going to make Himself known to His chosen people in a powerful and irrefutable way.

The High Cost of Commitment

²⁴ At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

²⁷ The Lord said to Aaron, "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. ²⁸ And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. ²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. ³⁰ Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ 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 4:24-31 ESV

Having received his final instructions from God, Moses set off for Egypt with his wife Zipporah, and two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Gershom, whose name means "sojourner there," is mentioned in chapter two, but Eliezer's name does not appear until chapter 18, and his name means "my God is helper."

The long journey back to Egypt required many stops along the way so that Zipporah and their young boys could rest. On one of those occasions, Moses received another visit from Jehovah that would prove to be far from pleasant. Recording the details of that fateful evening, he records that they had stopped for the night, and "the Lord met Moses and sought to kill him" (Exodus 4:24 NLT).

This statement is meant to shock the reader. It comes completely out of nowhere and provides no rationale or context for its existence. The reader is left to wonder why God would want to kill the very man He has called to be the deliverer of His chosen people. It makes no sense. It seems pointless and out of character for God. But there is a powerful lesson contained in this seemingly out-of-place sentence.

Moses had finally given in and obeyed God's commission to return to Egypt as His deliverer, but he was doing so in a state of disobedience. Moses had failed to keep one of the most important commands that God had ever given His people. More than half a century earlier, God had visited Moses' forefather, Abraham, and reiterated His promise to provide Abraham with a multitude of descendants. But as part of his covenant commitment, Abraham and his heirs were ordered to practice the rite of circumcision.

Then God said to Abraham, "Your responsibility is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility. This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised. You must cut off the flesh of your foreskin as a sign of the covenant between me and you. From

generation to generation, every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. This applies not only to members of your family but also to the servants born in your household and the foreign-born servants whom you have purchased. All must be circumcised. Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant. Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant.” – Genesis 17:9-14 NLT

The penalty for not carrying out this sacred rite was death. That is what God meant when He said, “any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off” (Exodus 17:14 NLT). This rather humorless wordplay was meant to convey the seriousness of the command. It was non-optional and binding on all generations of Abraham’s descendants.

Yet, Moses had failed to keep this command. It becomes readily apparent from the text that Gershom, Moses’ firstborn son, remained uncircumcised. We are given no reason for this oversight on Moses’ part, but the penalty for his failure to keep the covenant command was clear. Yet, rather than order the death of Gershom, God declares His intent to kill Moses.

It is no coincidence that this death sentence for Moses comes immediately after the record of God’s final words to Moses before he left Midian.

“...you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’” – Exodus 4:22-23 ESV

If Pharaoh refused to obey God, the life of his firstborn son would be forfeited. But because Moses refused to obey God and circumcise Gershom, it would be Moses who died and not his firstborn son. God was holding Moses personally responsible for this blatant violation of His covenant command.

In a desperate attempt to spare her husband’s life, Zipporah took matters into her own hands and immediately carried out the circumcision of Gershom. Then, in a rather strange display of frustration and disappointment, she took “her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it” (Exodus 4:25 ESV). In a sense, she was laying the blame at the feet of her husband. He had failed to lead his family well and, in doing so, had put them all at risk. Moses’ refusal to circumcise Gershom had placed a target on the young boy’s back because he would spend his life as a covenant violator who was worthy of death. He would also spend his life as an outsider, separated from fellowship with God’s covenant people.

Zipporah’s actions reflect her frustration with Moses, and she gives full vent to her anger when she tells her husband, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” (Exodus 4:25 ESV). In his commentary on the book of Exodus, the Italian Rabbi, U. Cassutto provides the following translation of Zipporah’s statement:

“I have delivered you from death, and your return to life makes you my bridegroom a second time, this time my blood bridegroom, a bridegroom acquired through blood”

In a sense, she has paid the bridegroom price. She has sacrificed the blood of their firstborn son in order to save the life of her disobedient husband. And, in doing so, she spared the life of Gershom as well. He would no longer live under the condemnation of death for his uncircumcised state.

And what makes this scene so important is that it emphasizes just how seriously God takes sin in the life of His chosen people. Moses had finally chosen to obey God and take up the mantle as His deliverer, but he was doing so in a state of disobedience. The one whom God chose to lead the circumcised sons of Abraham out of their bondage in Egypt, was leading an uncircumcised son into Egypt. This was unacceptable, and God was willing to kill the messenger rather than allow him to tarnish the entire mission with his own disobedience. Moses needed to be in a right relationship with God if he was going to serve as a messenger from God. What God had demanded of Abraham was true of Moses as well.

“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless...” – Genesis 17:1 ESV

There could be no hidden areas in Moses’ life. He could not afford to have any undisclosed indiscretions or secret sins. He was to stand before Pharaoh as God’s representative. When he spoke, he was to speak on behalf of God. So, his character would be integral to the carrying out of his commission.

As all this was going on, God was working behind the scenes to keep His promise to enlist Aaron, Moses’ brother, as his assistant. When Moses had expressed his reticence to act as God’s mouthpiece, God offered to let Aaron take up that responsibility.

“You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.” – Exodus 4:15-17 ESV

So, God arranged for the two to meet on the outskirts of Egypt, where Moses brought his brother up to speed on all that God had said and done back at Mount Horeb. We are given no insight as to how Aaron received all this news from his brother. But it must have been like drinking from a firehose. Aaron didn’t have the benefit of seeing the burning bush or hearing the voice of God. He simply had to take all that his brother said at face value and trust that this was a divinely ordained mission. And, by all indications, he heard his brother out and decided to join him in this rather Quixote-like quest.

They eventually arrived in Egypt, made their way to the land of Goshen, and gathered all the elders of the people of Israel.

Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. – Exodus 4:30 ESV

This God-ordained tag team went right to work, carrying out the commands of God and launching the providential plan that He had ordained. And probably much to Moses' surprise, "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 ESV).

Early on, Moses had questioned the feasibility of this plan. He wondered whether the people of Israel would even remember the name of Jehovah, let alone accept the far-fetched idea of Him orchestrating their deliverance from Egypt. But when he and Aaron faithfully did what God had told them to do, the people believed. They were desperate for someone to deliver them from their suffering and when they discovered that Jehovah had heard their pleas for help, they responded in worship. Suddenly, the gods of Egypt were out of sight, out of mind. Jehovah, the God of Israel, had returned and they were ready to give Him the glory and reverence He deserved. But their newfound faith was about to be severely tested.

Just When Things Were Looking Up

¹ *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.’”* ² *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.”* ³ *Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.”* ⁴ *But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.”* ⁵ *And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!”* ⁶ *The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen,* ⁷ *“You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves.* ⁸ *But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’”* ⁹ *Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.”* – Exodus 5:1-9 ESV

Chapter four ends with the promising statement, “And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction” (Exodus 4:31 ESV). Moses and Aaron had presented God’s message word for word.

“Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—has appeared to me. He told me, ‘I have been watching closely, and I see how the Egyptians are treating you. I have promised to rescue you from your oppression in Egypt. I will lead you to a land flowing with milk and honey...’” – Exodus 3:16-17 NLT

Then, as God had commanded, they backed up their words with actions, performing the signs Moses had received in the wilderness of Horeb. And evidently, their efforts proved successful in convincing the Israelites to believe that Jehovah had heard their cries and had come to deliver them from their miserable conditions in Egypt. Encouraged by what they heard and saw, “they bowed their heads and worshiped” (Exodus 3:31 ESV).

Having faithfully communicated God’s message to the people of Israel, Moses’ next stop was the royal throne room, where he and his brother hand-delivered an ultimate to Pharaoh.

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Let my people go so they may hold a festival in my honor in the wilderness.” – Exodus 5:1 NLT

Moses and Aaron were sticking with the plan and, so far, everything was happening just as God had said it would.

“The elders of Israel will accept your message. Then you and the elders must go to the king of Egypt and tell him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So please

let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord, our God.” – Exodus 3:18 NLT

But God had already warned Moses that Pharaoh would prove to be a hard nut to crack. This powerful, self-deified monarch was not going to play along with Moses’ request. In fact, he would find the very thought of it ridiculous and not worthy of consideration. But even that was part of God’s sovereign plan.

“I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand forces him. So I will raise my hand and strike the Egyptians, performing all kinds of miracles among them. Then at last he will let you go...” – Exodus 3:19-20 NLT

And as if reading a script written by the hand of God, Pharaoh responded, “Is that so?...and who is the Lord? Why should I listen to him and let Israel go? I don’t know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2 NLT). Overflowing with hubris, Pharaoh mocked his two visitors and belittled the status of this Jehovah (*Y^hōvâ*) who dared to order him around.

Interestingly enough, back when God called Moses to serve as His deliverer, Moses had expressed concern that the Israelites might know who Jehovah was.

“If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?” – Exodus 3:13 NLT

But according to the opening verses of this chapter, it was not the Hebrews who needed a primer on Jehovah’s identity, it was Pharaoh. And, in response to Pharaoh’s sarcastic inquiry, “who is the Lord?”, Moses simply stated, “The God of the Hebrews” (Exodus 5:3 NLT). He uses the generic term *ĕlōhîm*, which is a Hebrew word used of Jehovah, but also of all other gods. But Moses makes it clear that he is talking about a very specific “God,” the God of the Hebrews. The one true God who created the heavens and the earth.

Moses reiterates his request for Pharaoh to permit the Israelites a take what would be a six-day break from their work so that they can travel into the wilderness and worship their God. In a sense, he was asking Pharaoh to agree to unpaid time off for all Hebrew workers. But he insisted this was not so they could go on holiday, but so that they might worship their God. And then he added a previously undisclosed bit of information.

“If we don’t, he will kill us with a plague or with the sword.” – Exodus 5:3 NLT

Moses was insisting that they were obligated to obey the commands of their God. If they refused, Pharaoh could end up losing all his laborers, not just for six days, but for good. The ball was in Pharaoh’s court. He could accommodate Moses’ request and suffer a drop in productivity for about a week, or he could refuse and watch his primary labor force get wiped off the face of the earth. It was up to him.

After 400 years, the Egyptians had become familiar with the strange religious rites of the Israelites. They would have known that the offerings they made to their God involved animal sacrifices, and the Egyptians considered many of those animals to be sacred. They believed their gods manifested themselves through these creatures, and the idea of the Israelites sacrificing bulls and goats within the borders of Egypt would have appalled and disgusted them. That is why Moses asked permission to journey three days outside of the borders of Egypt.

But Pharaoh was not buying what Moses was selling. He was not about to release the Israelites into the wilderness for any reason or for any length of time, for fear that they might try to escape. So, Pharaoh doubled down on his previous answer and rebuked his two visitors for wasting his time and filling the heads of the Israelites with false hope.

“Moses and Aaron, why are you distracting the people from their tasks? Get back to work! Look, there are many of your people in the land, and you are stopping them from their work.” – Exodus 5:4 NLT

Having drawn a line in the sand, Pharaoh upped the ante and ordered his Egyptian slave drivers to make the lives of the Israelites worse than before. Even the Hebrew foremen who oversaw the chain gangs of laborers were ordered to drive their fellow Israelites harder than before. To increase their suffering and get their mind off of the messages of Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh ordered that all brick production be done without the benefit of straw. It wasn't that the Israelites were permitted to make straw-free bricks, but that they now had to gather the hay and stubble on their own. It added another layer of back-breaking labor to their already difficult task.

Pharaoh concluded that the Israelites were lazy and easily distracted by Moses' offer of a week off from work to worship in the wilderness. He was going to teach them a valuable and painful lesson they would not soon forget.

“Load them down with more work. Make them sweat! That will teach them to listen to lies!” – Exodus 5:9 NLT

It doesn't take a psychologist to deduce that this treatment was going to produce an adverse reaction among the people of God. They had been pumped by Moses' announcement that Jehovah had heard their cries. They were looking forward to seeing how God was going to improve their lot in life. Now, things had taken a very dark turn for the worse. Rather than experiencing deliverance, their pain and suffering had actually increased. And it wouldn't take them long to decide that they had been far better off before Moses and his brother showed up on their doorstep.

But little did the Israelites know that this was all part of God's sovereign plan. Their God was not up in heaven wringing His hands in worry. He had not been caught off guard by Pharaoh's harsh reaction. God had known all along that this would be Pharaoh's response. It was built into

the whole plan and was part of the sequence of events that would ultimately lead to the release of the Israelites and the judgment of the Egyptians.

From Bad to Worse

¹⁰ So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. ¹¹ Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” ¹² So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. ¹³ The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.” ¹⁴ And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, “Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?”

¹⁵ Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? ¹⁶ No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people.” ¹⁷ But he said, “You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’” ¹⁸ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.” ¹⁹ The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, “You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day.” ²⁰ They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; ²¹ and they said to 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.”

²² Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? ²³ 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 5:10-23 ESV

When God appeared to Moses in the wilderness near Mount Horeb, He had revealed His knowledge of the Israelites’ plight in Egypt.

“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...” – Exodus 3:7 ESV

And God had assured Moses that He was ready to do something about their untenable situation.

“...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 3:8 ESV

Much to his surprise and initial dismay, Moses learned that he was to be the one God would use to bring about the deliverance of His people. After much debate and a great deal of delay, Moses finally gave in to God’s call and made the long journey back to Egypt. And he and his brother, Aaron, in obedience to God’s command, delivered His messages to the people of Israel and Pharaoh. But while the Israelites were thrilled with the news of God’s presence among them and His plan to deliver them, Pharaoh had a far less sanguine response to God’s plan. In

fact, he was enraged at the audacity of these two nondescript and unimpressive Hebrews. How dare they walk into his palace and demand that he provide their fellow Israelites with a week off so they can worship their so-called God in the wilderness.

Rather than give in to Moses' request, he decided to teach this upstart Hebrew a painful lesson. To teach Moses who was boss, Pharaoh turned up the heat on the already suffering descendants of Abraham. Moses' arrival had gotten their hopes up and they were expecting an immediate improvement in their circumstances. But, instead, their situation got exponentially worse.

One of their duties as an unpaid workforce for Pharaoh was to manufacture the bricks used in the many construction projects around the kingdom. This labor-intensive process was difficult enough, but now it was going to become even more time-consuming and wearying because Pharaoh denied them access to the straw that helped bind the clay together. As punishment for their request for time off, he ordered them to find their own straw. This would require additional time and effort, but the daily quota of bricks would remain unchanged.

On top of this, Pharaoh ordered the Egyptian slave masters and Hebrew foremen to show no mercy. They were to push the Israelites relentlessly. When the people fell behind and failed to meet their quotas, the Egyptians punished the Hebrew foremen.

And in time, the people began to lose hope. They were in a no-win situation and there seemed to be no other recourse than to appeal to Pharaoh for mercy.

So the Israelite foremen went to Pharaoh and pleaded with him. "Please don't treat your servants like this," they begged. "We are given no straw, but the slave drivers still demand, 'Make bricks!' We are being beaten, but it isn't our fault! Your own people are to blame!" – Exodus 5:15-16 NLT

Pharaoh responded, but not with mercy. He accused them of being lazy and trying to use their request to worship their God as an excuse for shirking their duties. And he would have none of it. As far as he was concerned, their whole reason for being was to *work*, not to *worship*. Their job was to sacrifice on Pharaoh's behalf, not on behalf of some impotent deity from a backwater region like Canaan.

So, Pharaoh reiterated his expectation that they meet their daily quota of bricks or suffer the consequences. This left the Hebrew foremen in an even deeper state of despair as they exited the royal palace. Now, they had to go back and break this less-than-encouraging news to their coworkers. But on the way, they ran into Moses and Aaron. And it would not prove to be a well-timed or particularly propitious encounter for the two unsuspecting brothers.

Full of pent-up anger and frustration, the foremen unleashed their vitriol on these two relative strangers, blaming them for the recent spate of troubles.

“May the Lord judge and punish you for making us stink before Pharaoh and his officials. You have put a sword into their hands, an excuse to kill us!” – Exodus 5:21 NLT

As bad as things had been before Moses and Aaron arrived on the scene, the situation in Egypt had taken a decidedly dark turn since their unexpected arrival. These two men had brought down the wrath of Pharaoh and the full weight of the Egyptian government apparatus. The atmosphere had become oppressive and foreboding. And now, the disgruntled and disillusioned Israelites were turning their anger on God’s two messengers.

Moses’ worst nightmare had come true. He had feared this very thing happening. When God had first announced His plan to use Moses as His deliverer, the surprised shepherd had argued, “behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you’” (Exodus 4:1 ESV). He was already convinced that this mission was doomed to failure. Now, his suspicions had become a very painful and personal reality. This led him to cry out to God in despair.

“Why have you brought all this trouble on your own people, Lord? Why did you send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh as your spokesman, he has been even more brutal to your people. And you have done nothing to rescue them!” – Exodus 5:22-23 NLT

From his perspective, nothing had turned out well. He had left Midian and returned to Egypt only to find his own people ready to run him out of town on a rail. And, driven by his frustration and fear, Moses shook his fist in the face of God and dared to accuse Him of a failure to do the right thing. God had claimed that He was going to “deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:8 ESV) but instead, the whip of Egyptian slave masters had fallen on the backs of the Hebrew foremen. And now the anger of the foremen had come down hard on Moses and Aaron.

But God was not done. He had not promised *immediate* deliverance. And God had warned Moses that Pharaoh was going to reject their request to release the people of Israel. This was going to prove to be an epic battle of wills – the will of Pharaoh against the sovereign will of God Almighty. And though Moses was doubtful of the outcome, God had everything under full control. Yes, things were going to get worse before they got better. The circumstances under which the Israelites lived were going to become unbearable but that did not mean that God’s plan was fallible. His will would be done. The deliverance He promised would be forthcoming. And Moses was going to learn the invaluable and timeless lesson of waiting on God.

*Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you,
and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him. – Isaiah 30:18 ESV*

