

EXODUS—WEEK 3

PHARAOH SAYS, “NO.”



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Moses’ Journey into Egypt by Pietro Perugino (1450–1523)
On display in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City*

Moses and Aaron take their request to Pharaoh. Pharaoh blows them off and doubles the Hebrews’ workload, just as the LORD said he would.

But God also says He will personally deliver them out of Egypt.

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Thank you.

Exodus 4:24–6:13 — Pharaoh Says, “No.”
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1 Exodus 4:24–26

And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses’ feet, and said, “Surely you are a husband of blood to me!” So He let him go. Then she said, “You are a husband of blood!”—because of the circumcision.

This passage is a real cypher. Instead of just reminding Moses to circumcise his son, *the LORD met him and sought to kill him*. Then Zipporah does something that looks like an irrational outburst, except that it works, placating the LORD. What’s going on here?

First off, this is clearly about circumcision. Gershom isn’t circumcised, and this triggers God’s wrath. He’s not just mildly irritated about this.

Second, Zipporah figures this all out and solves the problem. But note that she’s also angry at Moses. So she must already know about circumcision, and know enough to recognize that this is why God is angry.

Another clue is that Zipporah performs the circumcision. That’s not normal. Then she *cast it at Moses’ feet and said*, “*Surely you are a husband of blood to me!*”

I know this is speculation, but if this isn’t a preexisting marital dispute, I’m the Queen of England. Zipporah is acting like she just caved in a bitter argument.

If so, then Gershom wasn’t circumcised because Zipporah wouldn’t allow it—which makes sense.

“You’re going to do what to our son? Over my dead body you will!”

So the first class in Moses’s study in the college of hard knocks is a real wake-up call. The lesson is simple but profound—“Take my commandments seriously.”

Moses will need to have that one down cold.

The greatest commandment to take seriously is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28–30). But that love is not some warm, fuzzy feeling; it’s obedience.

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.” — John 14:21a

This sounds like a curious definition of love, but it’s not. How should a toddler love his mom?

By not being a brat. We don’t expect heroism from children, or any other adult level sacrifices. Parents only want kids to not cause trouble.

Obedience is how a lesser being loves a greater one. My dog can love me by not peeing on the carpet.

Obedying God isn’t just a good idea. It’s love.

2 Exodus 4:27–31 (ESV)

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. 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. Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together 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. 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.

Notice that everyone gets the news second hand, from Aaron. Why doesn't Moses tell them himself what he saw? Aaron wasn't even there. What's the matter Moses? Cat got your tongue?

Yes. Moses isn't ready yet. God sent Aaron out to meet Moses because He understands timing.

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.” — Exodus 4:14 (ESV)

We're all familiar with the line, “God's timing is not our timing.” Specifically, God's timing is usually slower than our timing, especially if we need something. Of course, if it's about when we're going to get off the couch and serve Him fully—then it feels like He's rushing things.

Here we see a perfect example of someone (Moses) wanting to stay on the couch. God calls him to action but cuts him some slack. God doesn't just allow Moses to use Aaron as his mouthpiece; it was His idea.

Moses's transformation won't happen overnight.

Let's be honest; God's timing is irritating. Yes, it's all our fault—our sinful impatience is the real problem—but, if we're going to deal with it, we need to see it for what it is. We don't make progress by praying, “Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now.”

Never forget that God's plans are big. Our impatience is really just a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. We have a local perspective; we can't see what God's up to (not that we'd understand it anyway). In times of trial, we're supposed to remember that God sees the big picture.

Unfortunately, that's easier said than done—especially when we have no idea what the big picture might be. We memorize all the right words, but nothing feels right.

It might help to remember that this is exactly how we were told it would be. Both the Old and New Testaments portray many situations as despairing, yet ultimately glorious. They also warn us to expect the same.

It's what we signed up for.

3 Exodus 5:1–9 (ESV)

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.” 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.” 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.” And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!” The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 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.’ Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.”

This is a case where translating God’s name, YHVH, as “the LORD” loses something. Moses and Aaron actually say to Pharaoh, *“Thus says YHVH, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’”* That doesn’t impress Pharaoh.

The Egyptian polytheistic religion has lots of gods. Here are some of the best-known ones.

<http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/gods/explore/main.html>

From Pharaoh’s point of view, YHVH is just another god to add to the list—one he may not have even heard of. Moses and Aaron don’t call Him “the LORD” and Pharaoh isn’t thinking of Him that way. To Pharaoh, an unheard of God can’t be a very powerful one. That’s why he ends his response with, *“pay no regard to lying words.”*

Pharaoh’s skepticism is understandable but his meanness isn’t. His response to their request is tyrannical. He punishes them for even daring to ask for three days off. This guy makes Ebenezer Scrooge look like Mother Theresa.

And that’s the point. Pharaoh is sealing his fate. He’s about to have a very bad year and this sets the stage for all that. It will be a teachable moment—for someone who could use the teaching.

Pharaoh’s mistake is not being in awe of God. Christians are often accused of the same thing.

Being adopted and calling God daddy (abba) can make us too buddy-buddy with Him. God is not our buddy; He’s our Lord. Here’s gorgeous picture of His creation. Be sure to read the explanation below it.

<https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap180807.html>

It’s amazing that the author of all that pays us any mind at all, much less loves us.

4 Exodus 5:10–23 (ESV)

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. Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.” 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?”

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? 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.” But he said, “You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.” 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.” They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; 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.”

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “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.”

Imagine being this discouraged. Your spiritual leaders do something they know is right and they know is the LORD’s will, and yet it’s a total disaster. Your whole nation is cracking under the strain. Moses is completely depressed and asks God, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people?”

Oops! Moses has just accused the LORD of doing evil. Don’t worry; God’s going to give him a free pass—this time. After Moses has grown some, he’ll be held to a higher standard. For now, the LORD is teaching Moses to trust Him.

As always, God’s timing is often not to our liking (nor to Moses’s) but He knows what He’s doing.

Discouragement is one of the main ways that the forces of evil attack us. Even when our struggles are nothing compared to slavery, we still tend to get absorbed in our disappointments and lose heart. The LORD wants us to turn to Him for help.

Ask God to encourage those of us who need it. Pray that we will see positive signs, whether it’s in work or school or illness or just in-basket-itis. Pray that we won’t let our challenges get us down. Also, please ask the LORD to help us overcome our obstacles.

But most of all, may we see His hand at work. Trials are more endurable when we know what they’re for.

5 Exodus 6:1–13 (ESV)

But the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.”

God spoke to Moses and said to him, “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. Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘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.’” Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.

So the LORD said to Moses, “Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land.” But Moses said to the LORD, “Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?” But the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge about the people of Israel and about Pharaoh king of Egypt: to bring the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

To understand this passage, remember that the word translated as “*the LORD*” is really God’s name, YHVH. This isn’t about getting the people of Israel out of Egypt; this is about His name.

The key is when God says, “*I am YHVH. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name YHVH I did not make myself known to them.*” His covenant with His people is about to take a wondrous turn; it’s going to get personal.

From now on, God will be on a first name basis with His people. This precursor of the new covenant is magnificent, but it’s also dangerous.

The people of Israel will quickly learn to take God for granted.

We take God for granted too. In a sense, we’re supposed to take Him for granted; He keeps His promises. But the more reliable God is, the more we tend to think it’s no big deal. We count on God the way we count on water coming out of a faucet when we turn the handle. We’re not easy to impress.

Yes, we’re supposed to be secure in our salvation (1 John 5:13).

But our response should be to treasure that precious gift, rather than become complacent.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Which of the Ten Commandments do you take least seriously?
2. Has God taught you patience?
3. What is your favorite, most awe-inspiring picture or image?
4. When have you been too pessimistic?
5. Do you take your blessings for granted?