

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Moses Returns; Pharaoh Hardens His Heart

Exodus 4:18–6:13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson sets two truths side by side and must hold them both. First, it shows us the LORD as the covenant-keeping Redeemer. God reveals His name, recalls His promise to the fathers, and pours out seven 'I will' statements that frame the entire exodus and ultimately point to the greater redemption purchased by Christ. The student should leave certain that God's faithfulness rests on His own character, not on the strength of our faith or feelings. Second, the lesson introduces the hardening of Pharaoh, and here we must teach with care. The text plainly shows Pharaoh hardening his own heart again and again as he resists clear signs and commands. God did not coerce a willing servant into sin. God gave a defiant rebel over to the hardness he himself chose, and used even that rebellion to display His glory. We must not let this passage be twisted into Calvinistic unconditional election or an irresistible decree. The gospel call is real, and people are genuinely able to respond.

The lesson also aims squarely at the formation of the student. Most believers know what it is to obey and then watch life get harder, to be blamed by the very people they are trying to help, and to pray raw, almost accusing prayers. Moses does all of this, and God does not strike him down for honesty; He answers, 'Now you shall see what I will do.' Israel's 'broken spirit' that could not receive good news is a mirror for every discouraged saint. Teach this passage so that students learn to anchor their hope in God's name and promises rather than in their circumstances or their emotional weather.

Finally, keep Christ in view. The 'I will redeem you' of Exodus 6 finds its fullest meaning at the cross, where God redeemed a people for His own possession by the blood of the Lamb. The warning of Pharaoh's hardening finds its New Testament echo in Hebrews: today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. The aim is not merely to inform but to move every student toward soft-hearted, trusting, obedient faith in the God who keeps covenant.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read Exodus 5:1–2. Pharaoh answers the command of God with the words, 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice? I do not know the LORD.' What does this opening clash reveal about the real issue between Pharaoh and God, and why is knowing the LORD the heart of the whole book?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Exodus 5 opens with the central collision of the book. Moses and Aaron deliver God's word to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's reply is not merely stubborn, it is theological: 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.' Pharaoh, regarded in Egypt as a god himself, does not recognize the authority of Israel's God and refuses to bend to it. The entire contest that follows is God's answer to that question. By the end, Pharaoh and all Egypt and all Israel will know exactly who the LORD is.

Notice that the issue is knowing the LORD. The covenant name, often printed in English as the LORD in capitals, is the name God revealed at the bush, tied to His self-existent being, I AM WHO I AM. Pharaoh's problem is not lack of information so much as lack of submission. To 'know the LORD' in Scripture is to acknowledge Him and obey Him. The whole book of Exodus is, in one sense, the unfolding answer to Pharaoh's contemptuous question.

This is the heart of every human conflict with God. The real question underneath rebellion is always a question of authority: who is the LORD that I should obey His voice? Every person eventually answers that question with his life. Pharaoh answers it with defiance and is broken by it. Israel will be invited to answer it with worship and obedience at Sinai. The teacher should help students see that they too answer this question daily.

Point the class forward. The world still asks Pharaoh's question, still claims not to know the LORD, still folds its arms against His command. But God has now spoken finally in His Son, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. The question is not whether we will acknowledge Him, but whether we will do it now in glad submission or later in forced defeat.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The name of God (the LORD) and its meaning as the self-existent I AM
- To 'know the LORD' means to acknowledge and obey, not merely to have information
- Pharaoh as a picture of human pride that refuses God's rightful authority
- The book of Exodus as God's answer to the question 'Who is the LORD?'
- The same question confronts every person and is answered by how we live
- Ultimate fulfillment when every knee bows to the lordship of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- In what areas of life are we tempted to ask, in practice, 'Who is the LORD that I should obey?'
- What is the difference between knowing about God and truly knowing the LORD?
- How does the lordship of Jesus settle the question Pharaoh tried to dodge?

Question 2

Student Question:

Read Exodus 4:18–20. Moses had to leave the security of Midian and walk back toward the very place he had fled. What hard, familiar place is God calling you to face again in obedience, and what is holding you back?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses returns to his father-in-law Jethro and asks leave to go back to his people in Egypt, and Jethro sends him with a blessing: 'Go in peace.' God reassures Moses that the men who sought his life are dead. Then Moses takes Zipporah and his sons, sets them on a donkey, takes the staff of God in his hand, and turns back toward Egypt. The man who fled Egypt forty years earlier in fear now walks toward it in obedience.

There is real cost in this. Midian had become home. Moses had a wife, children, a trade, security, and the painful past was behind him. Obedience meant leaving the safe and familiar to walk straight back into the place of his deepest failure and danger. God's call rarely lets us stay where we are comfortable.

The staff in his hand is worth noting. It was an ordinary shepherd's staff, but God had touched it, and it is now called 'the staff of God.' What was common in Moses' hand became an instrument of divine power once surrendered to God's purpose. The teacher can draw out how God takes ordinary things and people, surrendered to Him, and makes them carriers of His work.

The application presses gently on the student. Most of us have a Midian, a place of safety we would rather not leave, and an Egypt, a hard place we would rather not face. Obedience often means walking from the one toward the other. The encouragement is that Moses did not go alone; the staff of God was in his hand, and the God who sent him went with him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience often requires leaving security and facing painful places again
- Jethro's blessing and God's reassurance as God's provision for the journey
- The ordinary shepherd's staff becomes 'the staff of God' once surrendered
- God uses common things and people yielded to His purpose
- We are never sent into hard obedience alone

Discussion Prompts

- What 'Midian' of comfort might God be asking you to leave?
- What 'Egypt' of past failure or present difficulty are you being called to face?
- What ordinary thing in your hand could become 'the staff of God' if surrendered?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read Exodus 4:21–23 with 4:10–16. God tells Moses ahead of time that He will work wonders and that Pharaoh will resist, and earlier God provides Aaron because Moses pleads that he is slow of speech. What do these verses reveal about how God equips and forewarns the people He calls?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In Exodus 4:21–23 God prepares Moses by telling him in advance what will happen: Moses is to perform the wonders God has put in his power, Pharaoh's heart will be hardened, and Pharaoh will not let the people go until God brings the final, terrible judgment on Egypt's firstborn, for Israel is God's firstborn son. God does not send Moses in blindly. He forewarns him so that the resistance will not destroy his faith.

This connects back to Exodus 4:10–16, where Moses had protested that he was slow of speech and tongue. God's first answer was sharp: who made man's mouth? Yet in mercy God also provided Aaron, Moses' brother, as a spokesman, and promised to be with both their mouths and teach them what to do. Here we see two truths together: God is not obligated to remove our weaknesses to use us, and God graciously provides help when we are weak.

The pattern of God equipping the called runs all through Scripture. He rarely calls the obviously qualified; He qualifies the called. Moses felt unfit, and God neither pretended otherwise nor let it stop the mission. He supplied Aaron, He supplied the signs, He supplied the words, and He supplied advance knowledge of the opposition. The teacher should help students see that their sense of inadequacy is not disqualifying.

Note the tender phrase, 'Israel is my firstborn son.' Long before Pharaoh's firstborn is threatened, God claims Israel as His own beloved son. This is covenant love language, and it ultimately points to the true and faithful Son, Jesus, called out of Egypt, through whom we become sons and daughters of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God forewarns Moses of Pharaoh's resistance so it will not shipwreck his faith
- God provides Aaron because Moses pleads inadequacy (4:10–16)
- God qualifies the called rather than only calling the qualified
- Our sense of weakness is not disqualifying; God supplies what we lack
- 'Israel is my firstborn son' as covenant love, pointing to Christ the true Son
- The plagues are announced as just judgment, not arbitrary cruelty

Discussion Prompts

- What 'slow of speech' weakness makes you feel unfit to serve God?
- How has God supplied an 'Aaron' or other help when you felt inadequate?
- Why does it matter that God forewarned Moses about the hard road ahead?

Question 4

Student Question:

Read Exodus 4:29–31. When Aaron spoke the words and did the signs, the people ‘believed,’ bowed their heads, and worshiped. When has hearing that God has ‘seen your affliction’ moved you to worship, and what stirs worship in your heart today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Aaron speaks all the words God had spoken to Moses and performs the signs before the elders and people, and the response is beautiful: ‘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.’ The news that God had seen their suffering moved an enslaved people to worship before a single chain was broken.

What stirred their worship was not yet deliverance but the knowledge that God had seen and remembered. After generations of slavery, the most precious word was that they were not forgotten. God had heard their groaning, He had looked on them, and He had come down to act. To know you are seen by God is itself a cause for worship.

This is a deeply formative truth for the student. We often think worship must wait until our problems are solved. But these slaves worshiped on the strength of God’s attention alone. Real worship is a response to who God is and what He has revealed about Himself, not merely to improved circumstances. Teach the class that the God who saw Israel sees them.

Their worship here is genuine and right, even though, as the next chapters show, their faith was thin and easily crushed by hardship. The teacher can hold both honestly: worship that is real can also be fragile. God meets us where our faith is small and patiently grows it. He does not despise the bowed head of a discouraged people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The people worship at the news that God has ‘seen their affliction’
- To be seen and remembered by God is itself a cause for worship
- Worship is a response to God’s character, not only to changed circumstances
- Genuine worship can still be fragile faith that needs growing
- God meets His people where their faith is small and patiently strengthens it

Discussion Prompts

- When has simply knowing that God sees you moved you to worship?
- Do we tend to make worship wait until our problems are solved? Why?
- How can we worship truly even when our faith feels fragile?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read Exodus 5:6–9. Pharaoh increases the labor and removes the straw, calling the people ‘idle.’ What does Pharaoh’s response reveal about the nature of the bondage God’s people were in, and about the kingdom of this world that opposes God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Pharaoh’s response to God’s command is to crush Israel harder. He orders that the people no longer be given straw to make bricks; they must gather their own stubble and still produce the same quota. When they cannot, the Israelite foremen are beaten. Pharaoh dismisses their plea with contempt: ‘You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ He reframes their desire to worship as mere laziness.

This exposes the nature of the bondage. It was not merely physical labor; it was a system designed to grind the people down so thoroughly that they would have no strength or spirit for God. Pharaoh understood that a people who want to go and worship the LORD are a people slipping out of his grip, so he loads them with labor to drive the very thought of God out of them.

There is a sharp lesson here about the kingdom of this world that opposes God. The tactics of bondage have not changed much. Sin and the world keep us so busy, so burdened, so exhausted that there is no margin left for God. When we begin to turn toward the LORD, the pressure often increases, and our longing to worship gets dismissed as impractical or self-indulgent.

The teacher should help students recognize this pattern in their own lives. The enemy of our souls would gladly bury us in straw-gathering so we never lift our eyes to God. Part of breaking free is recognizing that the relentless busyness which crowds out worship is itself a kind of slavery from which God means to deliver us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pharaoh increases labor to crush the people’s spirit and capacity for God
- Slavery aimed not only at the body but at the soul’s longing for worship
- The world’s tactic of burying us in busyness so we have no room for God
- Desire to worship dismissed as laziness or impracticality
- Increased pressure often follows the first turn toward obedience

Discussion Prompts

- How does the world or sin use busyness to crowd God out of our lives?
- Have you experienced increased pressure when you began turning toward God?
- What ‘straw-gathering’ in your life leaves no room for worship?

Question 6

Student Question:

Read Exodus 5:20–21. The foremen of Israel turned on Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the worsening conditions. When have you blamed God's servants, or felt blamed, when obedience brought hardship, and how should we respond when the people we are trying to help turn on us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Israelite foremen, beaten and desperate, meet Moses and Aaron coming out from Pharaoh and turn on them bitterly: 'The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.' The very people Moses came to deliver now blame him for making things worse. This is one of the loneliest moments in his calling.

It is a painful and common experience for anyone who tries to do God's work. You step out in obedience, the situation gets harder before it gets better, and the people you are trying to help hold you responsible. Their blame is understandable; they are suffering. But it stings deeply, and it tempts the servant of God to give up.

The teacher can help students prepare for this. Doing the right thing does not guarantee gratitude. Jesus Himself was rejected by the very people He came to save. When we are blamed for the hardships that come with obedience, the temptation is to become defensive, bitter, or to quit. The godly response is to take it, as Moses did, straight to God.

Notice what Moses does not do. He does not lash back at the foremen, and he does not argue. He carries the wound directly to the LORD in prayer. That is the model. When God's people turn on us in their pain, our refuge is not self-defense but the throne of God, where we can pour out our confusion honestly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The people Moses came to save blame him for their worsened suffering
- Obedience does not guarantee gratitude from those we serve
- Jesus too was rejected by those He came to deliver
- Temptation to defensiveness, bitterness, or quitting when blamed
- The godly response is to carry the wound to God rather than retaliate

Discussion Prompts

- When have you been blamed for hardship that came from doing right?
- How do we keep from becoming bitter when those we serve turn on us?
- What does it look like to take such hurt to God rather than retaliate?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Read Exodus 5:22–6:1. Moses takes his complaint straight to God: ‘Why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?’ What does it teach us about God that He receives such raw, honest prayer and answers, ‘Now you shall see what I will do’?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses turns to the LORD with words that are almost an 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.’ This is raw, honest, wrestling prayer. Moses lays his confusion and disappointment directly before God.

Remarkably, God does not rebuke Moses for the boldness of his prayer. He does not say, ‘How dare you question me.’ Instead He answers with a promise: ‘Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out.’ God meets honest lament with the assurance of His coming action. The ‘now’ is full of hope; the delay is about to end.

This teaches us something precious about prayer. God is big enough for our honest questions. The Psalms are full of ‘why’ and ‘how long.’ Faith does not always feel serene; sometimes it looks like a confused servant bringing his complaint to the only One who can answer. What matters is that Moses brings it to God rather than walking away from Him.

The teacher should encourage students that they may come to God with their real feelings, not a polished mask. God prefers the honest wrestling of a Moses to the polite distance of someone who has given up praying. And the answer God gives is not an explanation of the past but a promise about the future: now you shall see what I will do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses prays raw, almost accusing words to God in his confusion
- God receives honest lament without rebuking the one who brings it
- God answers not with an explanation but with a promise of action
- The Psalms model this honest ‘why’ and ‘how long’ praying
- Honest wrestling with God is closer to faith than polite distance

Discussion Prompts

- Do you feel free to bring honest, even confused, prayers to God? Why or why not?
- What does it mean that God answered Moses with a promise rather than an explanation?
- How can lament actually be an act of faith rather than a lack of it?

Question 8

Student Question:

Read Exodus 6:9. The people 'did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.' What weighs your own spirit down so that good news has trouble getting through, and what would it look like to bring that heaviness honestly to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the great 'I will' promises of Exodus 6, Moses brings the good news to the people, but the text says they 'did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.' This is one of the most poignant lines in Exodus. The people could not receive the best news they had ever heard because their spirit was crushed and their bondage was too heavy. The good word bounced off broken hearts.

Note that the text does not scold them. It explains them with tenderness. A broken spirit and harsh slavery had hollowed out their capacity to hope. They had heard promises before, perhaps, and nothing changed. Despair has a way of deafening us to good news. Discouragement is not always sin; sometimes it is the deep weariness of long suffering.

This is profoundly pastoral. Sometimes our problem is not that we do not believe God's promises are true, but that we are too worn down to feel them. The teacher should be gentle here. There are people in every class who, because of grief, exhaustion, or long trouble, cannot at the moment receive comfort, even good and true comfort. They are not faithless; they are weary.

The encouragement is that God did not abandon Israel because they could not listen. He pressed on with His plan to deliver them anyway. Our deliverance does not finally depend on the strength of our reception of it, but on the faithfulness of the God who promised it. He carries discouraged people out of Egypt even when their broken spirits cannot yet sing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A crushed spirit can block out even the best and truest good news
- The text explains the people's unbelief with tenderness, not scolding
- Discouragement is often weariness from long suffering, not faithlessness
- Pastoral care for those too worn down to feel comfort
- God's deliverance rests on His faithfulness, not on our strength to receive it

Discussion Prompts

- What weighs your spirit down so that good news has trouble reaching you?
- How should we care for fellow believers who are too weary to feel comfort?
- Why is it freeing that deliverance rests on God's faithfulness, not our strength?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read Exodus 4:21 and 7:3 alongside 8:15, 8:32, and 9:34, where Pharaoh hardens his own heart. How do we rightly understand the LORD 'hardening' Pharaoh's heart without concluding that God forces people to sin or unconditionally decrees who can respond to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question in the lesson, and it must be handled with great care, because few passages have been more misused. God says ahead of time that He will harden Pharaoh's heart (4:21; 7:3), and the narrative also says repeatedly that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15, 8:32, 9:34). Both are true, and they are not in conflict. The Scripture itself shows us how to read the divine 'hardening.'

First, look at the order. Through the early plagues, the active hardening is Pharaoh's own. He sees the signs, he feels the pressure, and again and again 'Pharaoh hardened his heart' and 'would not listen.' Only after this persistent, willful resistance does the text emphasize that the LORD hardened his heart. God gave a defiant rebel over to the hardness Pharaoh himself chose. This is the same righteous judgment Paul describes in Romans 1, where God 'gave them up' to the very rebellion they insisted upon.

Second, understand what hardening means. The same sun that softens wax hardens clay; the difference is in the substance, not the sun. God's signs and patience either soften a heart to repentance or harden a heart that refuses. Pharaoh met every gracious warning with greater defiance, and God's continued dealings only confirmed and deepened the choice Pharaoh kept making. God did not create a willing servant and force him into sin; He confirmed a willing rebel in the sin he loved.

Third, guard against the false conclusions. This passage does not teach that God arbitrarily picks who can and cannot be saved, nor that His decree is irresistible and human response is an illusion. That would contradict the whole of Scripture, where God 'desires all people to be saved' and pleads, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' Romans 9 uses Pharaoh to show that God is free to show mercy and to harden the obstinate as He judges right, but never to deny that the gospel call is real and that people are genuinely able to respond. The lesson of Pharaoh is not predestination to damnation; it is the terrible danger of resisting the clear voice of God until the heart sets like concrete.

Finally, bring it home soberly. Pharaoh is the Bible's great warning against a hardening heart. Every time we hear God and refuse, we are a little less able to hear Him the next time. Hebrews takes Pharaoh's lesson and points it straight at us: do not harden your hearts. The mercy that warns us is the very mercy that, if despised long enough, will leave us to our chosen hardness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pharaoh hardens his own heart first and repeatedly (8:15, 8:32, 9:34)
- God's hardening is a judicial giving-over, like Romans 1's 'God gave them up'

- The same sun softens wax and hardens clay; the difference is in the heart
- This passage does NOT teach Calvinistic unconditional election or irresistible decree
- God 'desires all to be saved'; the gospel call is real and can be answered
- Romans 9 shows God's freedom to show mercy and to harden the obstinate justly
- Hebrews applies Pharaoh's lesson: today, do not harden your hearts

Discussion Prompts

- How does the order of the text (Pharaoh hardens first) guard us from error?
- Why does the image of one sun softening wax and hardening clay help here?
- How does Hebrews 3 turn Pharaoh's story into a warning for us today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Read Exodus 6:2-8 again. God reveals His name and stacks up seven 'I will' promises of redemption. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the faithful, covenant-keeping God, fully revealed in Jesus, is forming you to trust His promises even when your spirit is broken.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In Exodus 6:2-8 God answers Moses' discouragement by revealing His name and pouring out a cascade of promises. He says, 'I am the LORD,' and recalls His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then come the great 'I will' statements: I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, I will take you to be my people, I will be your God, I will bring you into the land, I will give it to you for a possession. The deliverance rests entirely on what God will do.

Notice that every promise hangs on God's own name and character, not on Israel's worthiness or strength. The people were so broken they could not even listen, yet the promises stood firm. God's covenant faithfulness is the bedrock. He had bound Himself to the fathers, He had remembered, and He would act because that is who He is. This is the same covenant love that runs from Abraham all the way to Calvary.

The teacher should draw the line to Christ. The word 'redeem' looks forward to its fullest meaning in the New Testament. God redeemed Israel from Egypt with an outstretched arm; He redeemed His people from sin and death with the outstretched arms of His Son on the cross. 'I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God' is the heartbeat of the new covenant too, fulfilled in the church, God's own possession purchased by the blood of the Lamb.

This is where the whole lesson lands. The God who keeps His 'I will' to discouraged slaves is the God who keeps His 'I will' to us. Our hope is anchored not in our circumstances, which were against Israel, and not in our feelings, which had failed Israel, but in the unchanging faithfulness

of the great I AM. Press each student to name one concrete way this covenant-keeping God, fully revealed in Jesus, is teaching them to trust His promises even when their spirit is broken.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 'I am the LORD' grounds the seven 'I will' promises of redemption
- The promises rest on God's name and character, not Israel's worthiness
- Covenant faithfulness running from Abraham to the cross
- 'Redeem' fulfilled finally in Christ's redemption from sin and death
- 'I will be your God and you my people' is the heartbeat of the new covenant
- Hope anchored in God's faithfulness, not in circumstances or feelings

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the seven 'I will' promises means the most to you right now, and why?
- How does the cross deepen the meaning of 'I will redeem you'?
- Name one specific way Jesus is forming you to trust God's promises this week.