

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 3: Moses Returns; Pharaoh Hardens His Heart -- Exodus 4:18–6:13

Have you ever finally said yes to something you knew God wanted, only to watch the whole thing seem to fall apart the moment you obeyed? You take the step of faith, you screw up your courage, you walk through the door, and instead of doors swinging open and angels singing, life gets harder. That is exactly where Moses lands in these chapters. He has met God at the burning bush, he has heard the great I AM commission him, and now he packs up his wife and sons, kisses his father-in-law goodbye, and turns his face back toward Egypt. He is finally going. And almost immediately the road gets steep.

Watch how tangled it gets. There is a strange and sobering night encounter where God seeks to put Moses to death and Zipporah saves the moment with a flint knife. There is a brother, Aaron, sent out to meet him in the wilderness. There is a hopeful first meeting with the elders of Israel, who actually bow their heads and worship when they hear that God has seen their affliction. And then there is Pharaoh, who folds his arms and sneers, 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice?' The bricks get harder, the straw disappears, the people turn on Moses, and Moses turns on God. This is what obedience can feel like in the early going, before the deliverance, when the only thing you have is the promise.

And it is right here, in the middle of the mess, that God says the most staggering thing in the whole section. He gathers Moses up and reveals His name again, the covenant name, the LORD, and He stacks up a tower of promises that all begin with two of the strongest words in the Bible: 'I will.' I will bring you out. I will deliver you. I will redeem you. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God. I will bring you into the land. Seven mighty 'I wills' poured out over a discouraged man and a heartbroken people who, the text says so tenderly, 'did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.' God does not scold their broken spirit. He answers it with His name.

We are going to walk slowly through this passage because it holds two things you will need for your own walk with God. The first is comfort: that the God who calls you is faithful even when obedience makes life harder, and His 'I will' does not depend on your strong spirit but on His covenant character. The second is sobriety: that there is such a thing as a hardened heart, and Pharaoh is the warning. He hears the clear word of God, he sees the signs, and again and again he stiffens his neck. We will handle the hardening carefully and honestly, because the God of these chapters is both the great Redeemer who keeps His promises and the holy Judge who is not mocked. Let us meet Him here.

Group Discussion: Read Exodus 6:6–8. God answers a discouraged, enslaved people not with a lecture but with seven 'I will' promises rooted in His own name. What does this teach us about where our hope is anchored when our circumstances and even our feelings argue against us?

Personal Reflection: Moses obeyed God and his situation got harder before it got better, and the people's 'broken spirit' kept them from hearing good news. Where in your life right now has obedience seemed to make things worse, and how is your own discouragement keeping you from hearing what God is saying?

Read Exodus 4:18–6:13

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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'?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 17:1–8, the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that God now remembers and acts upon; Romans 9:14–18, Paul’s inspired treatment of Pharaoh and God’s mercy and justice; Hebrews 3:7–15, the warning not to harden your heart when you hear God’s voice; Titus 1:2, God who cannot lie and whose ‘I will’ is therefore sure; 1 Peter 1:18–19, redemption finally accomplished not with silver but with the precious blood of Christ

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