

Pharaoh Ignores God's Call

Purpose

To recognize and accept that God's authority takes precedence over all competing authorities

Bible Lesson

Background: Exodus 5:1–6:1

Exodus 5:1-9, 22–6:1

1 Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" 2 But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go." 3 Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword." 4 But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" 5 Pharaoh continued, "Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop

working!" 6 That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, 7 "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' 9 Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words." ...

22 Then Moses turned again to the LORD and said, "O LORD, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? 23 Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people."

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land."

Key Verse

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness." (Exodus 5:1)

Hearing the Word

Answering God's call can be costly, both to the called and to those supposed to benefit from their service. Last week we explored how God's empowering presence always goes with those who say "Yes" to God's call and commission. We also studied the Israelites' positive response to the initial acts of Moses and Aaron. This week's lesson explores the other side of serving God.

Exodus 5:1–6:1 records how Moses and Aaron faced a strong test of their mission. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was unwilling to release Israel from his control. Pharaoh's stubborn refusal brought Moses and Aaron into open conflict with the power and authority of Egypt. This text declares that God's authority must take precedence over all competing sources of authority.

Moses and Aaron Confronted Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1-5)

Fresh from their initial success in presenting to the Israelites God's plan for deliverance (Exodus 4:29-31), Moses and Aaron met with Pharaoh for the first time. The Bible does not provide the pharaoh's name, but he would have reigned during the New Kingdom period in Egyptian history (ca. 1540–1070 BC). The New Kingdom pharaohs were the most powerful of the pharaohs, controlling a large empire with vast riches and an imposing army. Moses and Aaron confronted arguably the world's most-powerful ruler at the time.

In faithful obedience to God's call, they issued the demands of the Lord, the God of Israel. Imagine the audacity.

Moses was the disgraced stepson of a previous pharaoh who had fled a generation earlier (Exodus 2:1-22). Aaron was an Israelite slave. Israel's God had been silent for some time. In the Egyptians' eyes, the Lord was merely the unknown god of an enslaved people. Moses and Aaron lacked any recognized authority or credibility with Pharaoh.

Exodus 5:1 records the Lord's demands to Pharaoh. Pharaoh was to release the Israelites from his authority so they could celebrate a festival in the wilderness. In particular, the Lord called the Israelites "my people." This was important. It denied Pharaoh's authority over or ownership of Israel. God's people belong to God. Thus, Moses and Aaron presented a direct challenge to Pharaoh's authority and power.

Pharaoh responded with an arrogant "No" to God's demands. His question, "Who is the LORD . . . ?" (Exodus 5:2) was no mere statement of ignorance but a denial of God's authority. It could be translated, "Who does the Lord think he is?" Pharaoh steadfastly refused to release Israel into the hands of God.

Trying a second time, Moses and Aaron reiterated that God had appeared to them and that the people of Israel were to travel into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord. If they did not, said Moses and Aaron, God would bring pestilence and violence upon them.

Pharaoh dismissed Moses and Aaron and ordered the people to return to their work. The dismissal was telling. First, Pharaoh viewed the request of Moses and Aaron cynically, as a ruse designed to take the people away from their work

(Exodus 5:4). Second, Pharaoh interpreted the request as a threat to Egypt's security. He observed that there were more Israelites than Egyptians (5:4). In his view, this presented a danger to his nation's safety and sovereignty. This issue was raised in 1:6-10 and served as the reason for Israel's enslavement in the first place. Something deeper and more profound was going on here, however.

Pharaoh's objections placed him and all Egypt in direct confrontation with the Lord. Israel neither belonged to Pharaoh nor existed merely to serve his whims. Instead, Israel existed to serve in God's mission to bring blessing and salvation to the nations (Genesis 12:3). By enslaving God's people, Pharaoh was thwarting God's broader mission to the world.

Moreover, the high birthrate of Israel was a blessing from God (Exodus 1:7; compare Genesis 1:28; 9:1; 17:6). By actively seeking to reduce the number of Israelites through hard labor and genocidal orders (Exodus 1), Pharaoh was opposing God's work in the world.

Pharaoh Sprang Into Action (Exodus 5:6-9)

After Moses and Aaron withdrew, Pharaoh sprang into action. Not content with rebuffing their demands, Pharaoh moved systematically to increase the Israelites' toil and hardship. He deprived the people of easy access to a key raw material used in the production of mud bricks: straw.

Brick making, using a combination of the hot Egyptian sun, mud pits, straw, and rectangular molds, was one of Israel's principal tasks in Pharaoh's service. A

straw and mud mixture was poured into molds and allowed to harden in the sun. In the dry climate of Egypt, mud bricks provided a durable building material. Now Israel was forced to meet the same brick production quota while also locating and gathering the necessary straw.

Exodus 5:8-9 provides insight into Pharaoh's motives and his perception of God's work through Moses and Aaron. Clearly, Pharaoh rejected out of hand the idea that some god actually commissioned Moses and Aaron. Instead, he cynically interpreted the demands of Moses and Aaron as "deceptive words" playing upon "lazy" workers, implying that the people of Israel desired to depart Egypt and sacrifice to God because of their laziness. Pharaoh gave no hint of belief in the possibility that a God existed who could compete with his own power and authority. Pharaoh had already declared, "I do not know the LORD" (Exodus 5:2).

Israel Capitulated (Exodus 5:10-21)

Pharaoh's new policy had swift and predictable results. The added burden of gathering their own straw was too much for the Israelites. They scattered across the land looking for straw, to no avail. Pharaoh's demands were ruthless and unfair. It was simply impossible to maintain the same production without easy access to straw. Pharaoh's stubbornness and unyielding brutality were brought into clear light. Despite the pleas of even the Egyptian-appointed supervisors, he refused to relent in his demand for the same number of bricks.

Pharaoh's strategy worked. The Israelites were broken. The Israelite supervisors' cries and protests were telling: "Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people" (Exodus 5:15-16). Three times they identified themselves as "your servants," that is, servants of Pharaoh; and once they called themselves "your own people." These were words of capitulation. The Israelites were not Pharaoh's servants, however; they were God's servants. They were not Pharaoh's people; they were God's people.

Pharaoh responded to the Israelites' verbal surrender with derision and brutality (Exodus 5:17-18), publicly charging the people with laziness and refusing to lighten their workload.

Keep in mind the reason for Pharaoh's cruelty. The purpose of Israel's labor was never merely the completion of tasks for Pharaoh. The true purpose of the oppressive labor was the destruction of Israel's ability to threaten Egypt's security and sovereignty (Exodus 1:6-11; 5:5).

The Israelite supervisors recognized the gravity of their situation (Exodus 5:19). They would not be able to sustain their brick production, and they likely would be worked to death. As they left the presence of Pharaoh, they met Moses and Aaron and placed upon them responsibility for their current plight (5:20-21).

The actions of Moses and Aaron did indeed serve as the immediate cause of Israel's increased troubles. Despite their faithfulness to the mission of God, they

had made the lives of the people of Israel worse than they had been before. This conclusion by the supervisors was quite reasonable, based on the realities on the ground; but it was a flawed conclusion because it neglected one key fact: The Lord, the God of Israel, had sent Moses and Aaron; and this God was determined, ready, and willing to deliver Israel from oppression.

Yet, at this juncture, it was an open question for Moses, Aaron, and all Israel: Where is God?

Moses Complained (Exodus 5:22–6:1)

Moses went to the only one with the power to change the present and shape a new future for the people: the Lord. Pharaoh had demonstrated that he was and would continue to be harsh, brutal, and stubborn. But God had come to deliver Israel.

In a manner instructive for us, Moses prayed to God (Exodus 5:22-23). His words were void of the typical clichés that are used in prayer. Instead, Moses chose a riskier path: He spoke his mind to God. Moses had heard God's promises to deliver Israel, but salvation had not materialized. Instead, the people of Israel had now been delivered more deeply into oppression at Pharaoh's hands. So Moses lamented Israel's plight and raised questions about his calling.

Moses' prayer demonstrated that he recognized the true authority in this series of events. Pharaoh was daunting, but he was not God. Pharaoh was a mere pretender to God's throne. Moses was frustrated and suffered a setback, but he had

not changed his allegiance. He was an agent in God's mission. He simply needed reassurance from God.

In contrast to Pharaoh and to the Israelite supervisors, Moses was clear about two key realities. First, Israel did not belong to Pharaoh. The people of Israel enslaved in Egypt were the people of God. Pharaoh's claims were illegitimate. Unlike the Israelite supervisors who understood themselves as Pharaoh's servants (Exodus 5:16), Moses specifically referred to Israel as "your [that is, God's] people" (5:23).

Second, Moses understood his mission to be a calling from God. God had sent him. Moreover, Moses recognized that his vocation was "to speak in your [that is, God's] name" (Exodus 5:23). In contrast to the cynicism of Pharaoh who viewed the call for the release of the people of Israel as a ploy to spare them from work (5:4-5, 17) and Moses' words as "deceptive" (5:9), Moses recognized that his calling was to serve as God's human agent before Pharaoh.

God's response (Exodus 6:1) was direct. Deliverance was coming. God would act mightily against Pharaoh. Pharaoh would be forced to release the people of Israel into God's service. In fact, Pharaoh would drive them out of the land. God had never promised Moses that Israel's deliverance would be easy. God announced ominously in 3:19 "that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand." This reality was coming to pass. It remained for Moses to focus on serving God faithfully and to refuse to submit to the competing authority represented by the stubborn and cruel pharaoh.

Seeing the Need

The life of faith is risky. More than a mere intellectual or spiritual exercise, following Jesus is a moment by moment walk, a public rather than a private matter. We witness to the gospel's truth in both words and deeds. Without action, the witness may be less than vivid.

Poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot wrote, "The greatest proof of Christianity for others is not how far a man can logically analyze his reasons for believing, but how far in practice he will stake his life on his belief."¹

Most of us will not have to stake our lives on our belief in Jesus. We will be faced with frequent temptations to compromise our commitments to God's mission, however. People and powers will vie for the place of honor in our lives. The challenge may come from a loved one who does not share our allegiance to God or from a supervisor at work who asks us to act unethically. Our own consumerist culture may tempt us to substitute a focus on the acquisition of material goods for an authentic relationship with God. The challenge may also rise up from within as we seek to shape a faith on our terms rather than on God's.

Today's lesson focuses on the need to recognize God's authority above all other competing authorities. How would our lives be different if we were fully committed to God in all parts of our lives?

Living the Faith

Write our lesson's Purpose Statement on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper: "To recognize and accept that God's

authority takes precedence over all other competing authorities.”

The statement “Jesus is Lord” expresses more than a religious sentiment. Acknowledging Jesus as Lord is a way of life. God advances God’s mission and kingdom through persons like us (See Matthew 6:33.).

As you work through the lesson plan below, make use of the “Hearing the Word” section above as needed.

Invite a class member to open the session with prayer, or offer the following prayer:

Gracious God, guide us today as we read and reflect on our Bible Lesson. Help us to be undivided in our loyalty and commitment to your mission despite the many competing claims on our lives. Take the words off the printed page and impress them upon our hearts and minds so that we may live as the people you need us to be in the world today. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Setting the Scene

Note that our Bible Lesson is about a clash between competing authorities: God and Pharaoh. Moses as God’s agent of redemption was caught in the middle of this struggle. As followers of Christ, we can often feel the tugs of competing masters in our own lives as numerous voices invite us to compromise or move away from the mission to which God has called us.

Ask: *What in your life serves as a competing authority to your commitment to follow Jesus into the world in mission?*

Engaging the Text

Invite a class member to read aloud Exodus 5:1-9. Fresh from their successful briefing of the people of Israel about God’s intent to deliver them, Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh. They entered into Pharaoh’s presence and announced God’s claim on God’s people: “Let my people go” (Exodus 5:1).

Ask: *What was Pharaoh’s response? (Pharaoh categorically rejected the Lord’s demand and denied the Lord’s authority. Pharaoh also did not recognize any claim by God on Israel. In Pharaoh’s eyes, Israel was not God’s people but merely Israel, a subjugated people in his service for the glory of Egypt.)*

Ask: *Why do you think Pharaoh did not recognize the authority of the Lord? (Pharaoh was the most-powerful ruler of his day. What did he have to fear from a god whose subjects were slaves?)*

Note Exodus 5:3, where Moses and Aaron attempted to persuade Pharaoh a second time to release Israel for a period of worship in the wilderness. Ask: *How would you describe Pharaoh’s response in verses 4-9? What was Pharaoh’s view of Israel’s religion? (Pharaoh had a cynical view of religion. He did not see Moses and Aaron’s claim as credible. He thought it was simply a scheme to relieve the people of Israel of their workload. Moreover, Pharaoh heightened his oppressive actions, forcing the Israelites to meet the same daily quota of bricks while also taking on the additional work of providing the necessary straw.)*

Stress the significance of Pharaoh’s reference to the great number of Israelites in the land (Exodus 5:5). Ask volunteers

to read aloud Exodus 1:6-10 and Genesis 1:27-28. Then ask: **How do these passages help us understand the way Pharaoh responded and his sin in doing so?** (*Exodus 1:6-10 reports the high birthrate of the Israelites in Egypt. The vast number of Israelites caused concern among the Egyptians. Pharaoh worried that Israel would join with Egypt's enemies in an alliance to destroy Egypt. Harsh labor was Pharaoh's plan for thwarting Israel and reducing the population. Genesis 1:27-28 describes the creation of humankind in God's image and describes God's intention for humanity to be fruitful and fill the earth. Notice that Exodus 1:7 uses the same language to describe God's people. In other words, the abundance of Israel was a sign of blessing from God. Israel as God's people was beginning to fulfill in part God's original design and will for all humans. Thus, by viewing Israel as a threat, Pharaoh unwittingly placed himself in direct opposition to God's plans for humankind. Pharaoh made matters worse by seeking to destroy Israel through oppressive labor. Pharaoh's sin was thus not merely one of injustice against a people, but an anti-creational act that sought to thwart God's will for the world.*)

Ask: **What are some tangible ways we can help others "know the Lord" today?** (*Living as the people of God involves embodying and reflecting the character of Jesus. [Read aloud First Peter 2:12.] Though our temptation is to substitute words for actions, we need to learn to be the first to serve and the last to speak. This does not mean that we should not share the content of our faith. Instead, we*

are to build a foundation based on action and gain the credibility to speak so that others will listen.)

Note that the optimism of Exodus 4:31 gave way to capitulation to Pharaoh in 5:10-21. Point out the Israelite supervisors calling themselves "your servants," that is, servants of Pharaoh rather than servants of the Lord, and their criticism of Moses (5:20-21).

Ask: **What resources can we turn to when our faith is crushed and we are tempted to elevate some other authority to replace God as the lord of our life? How have these resources helped you?**

Moses Complained

Ask a class member to read aloud Exodus 5:22–6:1. Then ask: **How would you describe Moses' prayer? Can it serve as a model for our prayers today? Why or why not?** (*Moses clearly was discouraged. From his perspective, he had fulfilled his end of the mission by confronting Pharaoh. He was disappointed by God's apparent inaction. Instead of bringing deliverance, God's [in]actions had only made matters worse. Moses' prayer did not exhibit the typical piety that marks much of our prayer language. This is important. God expects faithful obedience, but this does not reduce us to "yes men" or "yes women." God invites us into authentic relationships of honesty. Moses' prayer was a model of honest prayer. It was not the prayer of the faithless; it was a prayer of the faithful who wanted to continue the risk of faith.*)

How did God respond to Moses' prayer? (*Despite the cruelty and stubbornness of Pharaoh, God would deliver*

God's people. God can be trusted. There is no other legitimate authority.)

Aligning Our Lives

Divide class members into small groups and ask each group to summarize insights they gained from the Bible Lesson. Call for reports from each group and list responses on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper.

Next, guide the class in a time of focused reflection as you read aloud the following questions:

Am I fully committed to living for God?

Who or what causes my commitment to waver?

How do I need to change in order to settle the issue of competing authorities?

Close the session by singing or praying "Take My Life and Let It Be" (399 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*).

¹T.S. Eliot; see <http://cqod.gospelcom.net/index-07-29-00.html> quote.

Optional Activities

Lead the class to examine Amos 7:10-17 and Acts 5:17-32 for other scriptural settings that deal with the challenge of competing authorities. The Amos passage deals with the prophet Amos' conflict with Amaziah the priest of Bethel. Acts 5:17-32 narrates the apostles' refusal to obey an order from the authorities to refrain from teaching in the name of Jesus. Amos and the apostles were faithful to God and refused to compromise their faith by submitting to a lesser authority.

To help facilitate this study, consider the nature of the conflict; what God's people risked by obeying God; and how the conflict was resolved.

Lead your class to create a brief skit based on the events of Exodus 5:1-6:1. Develop a script that teaches the importance of allegiance to God in the face of competing authorities and includes the characters in our Bible Lesson: Pharaoh, Moses, Aaron, the taskmasters, the supervisors, and the slaves.