

# Pharaoh Ignores God's Call

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## **Purpose**

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

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## **Hearing the Word**

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below. The background text is 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 super-

visors, 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)

## Seeing the Need

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In the movie *Raising Helen*, after a tragic accident kills her sister and brother-in-law, the responsibility of parenting their three children is thrust upon Helen. The interesting twist is that her departed sister entrusted Helen (the youngest sibling) to rear her children rather than her older sister, Jenny, a veteran mother with experience and a firm hand.

At one humorous point, when Helen experiences difficulty extracting a crowd of partying teenagers from her apartment, she calls her sister for much-needed advice.

“Just tell them to get out, and be firm,” Jenny advises.

“I tried that Jenny, but they don’t seem to want to leave yet. What do I say to them if they ask why?”

Jenny retorts, “You tell them, *Because I said so!*”

Helen was dealing with a problem that all parents have at one time or another. She had come face-to-face with a group of kids who did not recognize her authority.

People of all ages seem to have a great deal of difficulty recognizing and listening to authority and discerning between competing authorities. This explains some of what was at stake in the events described in our Bible Lesson. Who really was in charge? Who had authority over the people of Israel? This lesson will seek to explore these and similar questions.

## Living the Faith

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So just who was in charge in these intriguing conversations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh? Was it Moses and his brother, two men just in from out of town with big stories to tell but no experience as supervisors, no political clout, and nothing to back up their claim to authority other than a flimsy “because God said so”? Was it Pharaoh, the widely recognized king and ruler of Egypt, who commanded armies, courtiers, and slaves? Was it middle management, **“the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors” (Exodus 5:6)**, who had more direct knowledge of working conditions on the ground? In a world with so many competing authorities, such questions are not always easy to answer.

Human beings like to be in control. How else can one explain the first couple’s willingness to forsake a paradise in exchange for nothing more than a small bite of forbidden fruit? God gave Adam and Eve a smorgasbord of fresh produce to eat to their hearts’ content, but the words **“you shall not” (Genesis 2:17)** proved to be their undoing. It may be easy enough to say, “God is the final authority on all things”; but something always seems to get lost in translating such words into action. In Pharaoh’s case, the command was, **“Let my people go” (Exodus 5:1)**. His refusal to obey would be his undoing. In both cases, an underlying question lay beneath the surface: “Who has the authority to order my life?”

*How do you respond to such a question? Do you ever find yourself resisting authority?*

### **“Who Is the LORD?” (Exodus 5:1-3)**

Pharaoh’s response to Moses and Aaron was probably to be expected: **“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” (Exodus 5:2)**. The word *know*, from the Hebrew *yada*, includes in its meaning

things like “to be acquainted with” and “to confess, acknowledge, or accept as an authority.” In this heated exchange over authority, several bosses were in the room and at least two—both Pharaoh and Moses—claimed to have divinity on their side. How is one to discern the truth between competing claims of authority? How can someone “know” the Lord in a way that leads to confession, acknowledgement, and acceptance of God’s authority?

One of the key ways Christians “know” anything is by revelation from God and subsequent faith in God. **“The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us” (Exodus 5:3).** These were the words of Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh. Pharaoh was unimpressed. We need to remember that Moses had similar misgivings at the beginning. His objections to God’s call had been numerous. His doubts and questions, both about who God was and what God was asking him to do, had begun a long and heated exchange on Mount Horeb (3:11–4:17). Indeed, after hearing Pharaoh’s response, Moses could easily have run back to God with a big “I told you so!” Recall his question in Exodus 4:1: **“But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’”**

God had **“revealed himself”** to Moses and Aaron, and now God was using them as messengers to carry news of this revelation to the king of Egypt. Pharaoh had not yet seen signs and wonders. Pharaoh had not encountered a burning bush. Pharaoh had not heard a word directly from God. Yet as the story unfolds, Pharaoh would see and hear far more than merely a staff turned into a snake and a hand turned leprous. What made the difference? Why did Moses believe and heed and Pharaoh doubt and disregard?

Once Pharaoh had never heard, but now God’s command to free the Israelites had been proclaimed to him. Once there had been no one to carry this word to the king, but now Moses and his brother had been called to bear the news. Once there had been no sending forth of God’s messengers, but now Moses and Aaron had been commissioned. Unfortunately for Pharaoh and the Egyptians, it was a word that would go unheeded.

The exchange between Moses and Pharaoh is a stark reminder that hearing is not enough. Even belief is not enough if it is not followed by obedience and acceptance of God’s sovereignty and authority over our lives. To “know” God truly and fully is to go further, to go deeper: beyond witnessing God’s deliverance of others (Exodus 7:5),

beyond observing God's frightening power (7:17), beyond discovering God's dominion over creation (8:1-14). It is to have intimate and loving knowledge of God and seek to do God's will and obey God's commands.

*How do you answer Pharaoh's question, "Who is the LORD, that I should heed him?"*

### **Competing Claims to Power and Authority (Exodus 5:4-9)**

Pharaoh was quick to thumb his nose at Moses' words. He had had enough of this conversation that may have been amusing at first but now was simply annoying. **"Why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" (Exodus 5:4).** Pharaoh may not have known the modern expression "Time is money," but his words imply that time wasted in conversation was time lost for labor on his pet building projects.

It is interesting to note the difference between God and Pharaoh in terms of how they exercised power and authority. God's power and authority were marshaled for the cause of liberation; freedom from slavery; and worship of God, the Lord and Creator. God had heard the cry of the people and seen their suffering in Egypt. God acted out of love and compassion for those who were marginalized and oppressed. God enlisted people to bring the news of God's love, hope, and freedom to those who were in bondage.

Pharaoh's power and authority were in stark contrast to God's. Pharaoh's control of taskmasters, supervisors, courtiers, and slaves was based on a politics of fear. **"Now they [the Israelites] are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!" (Exodus 5:5).** It could be said that this statement referred only to a fear that there would not be enough hands to complete the construction work, but the discerning reader will recall that there was always a greater fear beneath this one (1:10).

An even closer look at this passage reveals that Pharaoh's power was based not only on fear but also on forced labor, violence, and deceit. Pharaoh twisted and manipulated every word and command he received from Moses. Moses told Pharaoh that God desired freedom and worship. Pharaoh's political spin attempted to turn the issue into one of laziness and sloth (Exodus 5:8). Moses spoke the truth about how God's will had been revealed to him on the mountain.

Pharaoh basically called him a liar: **“Pay no attention to deceptive words” (Exodus 5:9).**

The story is as contemporary as it is ancient. We still live in a time when competing claims to authority and power demand our allegiance and obedience. Sometimes we have a legitimate need for spiritual discernment to discover what God is calling us to say and do. But more often than we sometimes admit, the decision before us is clear: serve God even if it means temporary suffering and work without straw or obey the competing authorities that rule us through fear, violence, and threat of harming our livelihood.

In those instances, as Christians who already confess faith in God and acknowledge God’s power and authority in our lives, we have a different question to answer. The question is not, “Who has legitimate authority over our lives?” The question is, “What do we do when we find ourselves caught between what we know to be right in the sight of God and what we know to be a conflicting claim on our lives?” To put it another way, how do we respond when fear of imminent repercussions from human authorities overshadows in our hearts and minds the promise of God’s in-breaking kingdom of love and justice? That is the more-important question.

***How can we discern God’s voice when we hear competing voices? When God’s will is clear but difficult to obey, do you ever find yourself capitulating to the status quo?***

### **Contrary to Popular Appearances (Exodus 5:22–6:1)**

Moses was getting it from all sides. God had called him to what seemed an impossible task. To make matters worse, Pharaoh did not just reject Moses’ proposal, he made things worse for the Israelites, demanding that they make the same number of bricks each day without straw being provided for them—the people would have to gather the straw themselves (Exodus 5:7). Now the Israelite supervisors cornered Moses after they heard the bad news from Pharaoh, and Moses got it again. **“The LORD look upon you and judge!”** they said. **“You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (5:21).**

The situation looked desperate. Who was in charge? At the moment, the answer seemed obvious to everyone: Pharaoh. Pharaoh was calling the shots. Pharaoh was setting the terms. Pharaoh was holding all the cards. Pharaoh was in control. Even Moses suc-

cumbed to the mounting pressure of rage and frustration as he turned to God and cried, **“Why did you ever send me? 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”** (Exodus 5:22-23).

The problem for Moses and for the Israelites was not only learning to recognize and accept God’s authority over Pharaoh’s, or that of any other competing authority figure; it was doing so in spite of how things appeared in the world. Moses and the Israelites were called to live faithfully in-between the time of God’s promised deliverance and God’s actual deliverance yet to be accomplished.

Christians should find this state of affairs familiar. We live between the time of Christ’s victory over sin and death that took place through his resurrection and the time of Christ returning in glory when God’s reign will come in its fullness. In the meantime we are charged with living obediently in the here and now as we witness to God’s reign of peace, salvation, liberation, and love—despite the way things may appear in the world around us. Sometimes God’s call to us demands that we say “no” to authorities that are in conflict with God’s will and way. Sometimes it means we are a small, minority voice against voices that seem more powerful and compelling. Sometimes it means trusting God and God’s promises in spite of what worldly wisdom tells us to do.

*How do you respond when what you believe is true seems to be contrary to what you experience in the world?*

**Lord, help us to recognize and accept your authority, even when there are competing voices and authorities demanding our allegiance. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

### **Daily Bible Study**

**June 22:** Led to Freedom by God. Exodus 13:17-22.

**June 23:** Pursued by the Enemy. Exodus 14:1-9.

**June 24:** Overtaken by Fear. Exodus 14:10-14.

**June 25:** God Is Our Refuge. Psalm 46.

**June 26:** Trust in the Lord. Proverbs 3:3-10.

**June 27:** Celebrating Deliverance. Exodus 15:1-13.

**June 28:** Saved From the Enemy. Exodus 14:15-25, 30.