

Bricks Without Straw

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[0:00] Well friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Father, we do thank you so much for your word. We thank you for its encouragement to us, for its speaking to us your truth, for its witnessing to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, we pray that you would help us understand it today and that you'd be at work in us by your spirit that our lives might be transformed. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well friends, in my view, it's relatively easy to imagine how Moses might have felt as he went to approach Pharaoh in chapter 5.

You might remember this, we're resuming our series in Exodus that we were going through some time ago. You might remember where we were as we looked at Exodus before. Moses had experienced what was, you know, really a mountaintop experience.

God had given him this spectacular sign. God had met with him. God had spoken with him. God had assured him that his mission would be successful. He'd given him these great signs and wonders to bring to Pharaoh.

[1:10] And on top of that, stage 1 of God's mission had been a resounding success. You see, in Exodus chapter 4, verses 29 to 31, Moses met with the Israelite leaders.

They listened to him. They watched the signs that he performed. They accepted what he said. The reception they gave Moses was all that he could have expected. And my guess is that Moses was brimming with confidence as he marched into the presence of Pharaoh.

My guess is confirmed by the way that he acts and speaks. You see, first, it appears as though he's brave enough to go on his own. He's forgotten God's order to take the elders of Israel with him.

And as he was instructed in chapter 3, verse 18. Second, you can see his confidence in the words that he speaks, the way that he speaks in verse 1. He uses the language of a prophet and he says, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.

The tone is that of an order. Pharaoh must hear what this Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, says. He must obey God's word. He must let God's people go.

[2:16] And in verse 2, Pharaoh responds. It is a response full of sarcasm, if not outright scorn. And who is the Lord?

Who is Yahweh that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go. Can you see what he's saying?

He's saying, I have no knowledge or experience of this Yahweh you are speaking about. Moreover, I have absolutely no respect for him. Therefore, there is no reason to do what you're saying.

And of all the things that I'm likely to do with a bunch of slaves, sending them out into the wilderness for a party, a festival, is the very last thing I would consider. It must have been a devastating blow to Moses, I reckon.

Full of confidence and Pharaoh's just not interested. And you can see this by the way, by what he does. Look at verse 3. He tones down what he had previously said. Sort of apology and explanation has supplanted command.

[3:14] First, he explains, well, the Lord is the God of the Hebrews. And second, he explains that he's met with him. And third, he changes celebrating a festival, in other words, a party, to a more religious term of sacrifice.

In other words, what sounded like a party has now become a religious obligation. And fourth, he shifts the focus, the pressure from Pharaoh to himself and his people. They've been pressed by God.

And if they don't obey God, well, he might fall upon them in judgment. And the uncompromising divine command has now turned into a weak-kneed appeal to Pharaoh's self-interest. You know,

after all, we wouldn't want Pharaoh to lose some of his valuable slaves because, you know, Yahweh is a bit heavy-handed with them in judgment.

Three days is just a small cost to pay for some peace from a vengeful God. But Pharaoh's response, however, in verses 4 and 5 is uncompromising. Moses and Aaron are distracting the people from their task.

And their task is to work for Pharaoh, not to obey this command from some unknown God. Pharaoh adds another element in verse 5. He says, These verses contain the very first words from Pharaoh about God.

[4 : 36] And it's very clear what he's saying. He's saying, I am Pharaoh. I am in control. And the God of the Israelites is of little or no consequence to me.

What's more, his people are important only insofar as they are available for my workforce. You see, friends, these verses describe the real issue of this chapter in the following story.

You see, these verses say the real issue and the real question is, Who is really God? Is Pharaoh really a self-determined man who can disregard the God of Israel as he says he wants to?

Is Pharaoh his own God? Or is he subject to the real God, the Lord? This is the main focus of this chapter and the chapters that will follow, the battle for supremacy between these two persons, God and Pharaoh.

Pharaoh, the main issue you see, it looks something different in the coming chapters, is not a battle between Moses and Pharaoh. No. No, the main issue here is the contrast between Pharaoh and Yahweh, the Lord.

[5 : 41] And the narrator wastes no time in pursuing this theme. For in verse 1, God commanded through his agent, but the command had fallen on deaf ears. In verse 6, Pharaoh does some commanding of his own.

Look at him. He commands his agents. And it is brutal and oppressive in its consequences for the people of God. Until now. See, they've been making bricks using pre-prepared chopped straw. Not any longer. Now, the people of God will have to wander the countryside, searching for their own straw, gathering it from wherever they can find it, you know, scratching around for pieces of straw that have fallen about.

And verse 12 indicates that they'll now have to make bricks using trashy stubble that's just been blown around by the wind. It is a very shrewd move by this cunning king. The boldness and fear of Aaron and Moses will result in hardship for the people they claim to represent.

And it's inevitable what the people are going to do, isn't it? They are going to rebel against their leaders. Or at least that's what he wants them to do. But there's even more behind this move than this.

[6 : 51] You see, look at verse 10. I wonder if you can see the similarity between verse 10 and verse 1. In verse 1, In verse 10, And it's clear that Pharaoh has won round one.

For his people are not rescued by this powerful God. Instead, this powerful human king increases the pain and the misery of their slavery. And that increase is clearly painted in verses 10 to 21, which we'll now look at.

Look at verse 10 again. Verse 10 talks about the supervisors of the people. Now, verses 14 and 15 indicate these supervisors, they're not Egyptians, they're Israelites.

The Israelite supervisors are therefore caught between two obligations. An obligation to Pharaoh and an obligation to their own people. And they decide they're going to speak up on behalf of the people.

And in verse 15, they do. Now, I want you to notice what's going on. In Exodus chapter 2, verse 23, Israel had cried out to God. Now, the Israelite supervisors cry out to Pharaoh.

[8 : 08] In chapter 2, God heard and saw and was concerned. He knew when the Israelites cried out to him. Pharaoh, he's got no such concern.

In fact, not only is he unconcerned, he even mocks them. You are lazy. Lazy. It is clear that the approach by Moses and Aaron at the beginning of the chapter has incensed him.

And he is determined he's going to take on this God, Yahweh. He will take on his prophets. He will torture his people. And he's going to win the day. And verses 19 to 21 show us that Pharaoh's strategy is successful.

Because look at what happens. The supervisors come to Moses and Aaron. They forcefully accuse them of wrong. Look at verse 21. Now, these are angry people, aren't they?

This is a massive turnaround. We started the chapter with these two men brimming with confidence, marching into the presence of Pharaoh with the full support of God and his people, issuing ultimatums to Pharaoh.

[9 : 31] And at the end of the chapter, we have the Masses were with their tail between their legs, no longer having the support of the people. Instead, they're the brunt of harsh accusations and curses from the leaders of the people.

But there's more. In chapter 3, verse 19, God said that the king of Egypt would not let the people go unless compelled by a mighty hand. Look at verse 21.

Whose hand is mighty in this verse and at the end of this chapter? The mighty hand in this chapter does not belong to the Lord.

It is not directed at rescuing his people. The mighty hand here is the hand of Pharaoh and his officials to kill the people of God. So the final verses of chapter 5, the first verse of chapter 6, are really not that surprising.

Moses doesn't try to defend himself against the charge level by the supervisors. Instead, he goes to the source of his trouble. He talks to God in verse 22. And just like Adam and Eve in the garden, he passes the buck.

[10 : 35] The supervisors blame Moses and Aaron for the situation they found themselves in. Just like Eve blamed the serpent. Moses blames the Lord just as Adam blamed God. And listen to his words.

Oh Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he's mistreated this people.

And you have done nothing at all to deliver your people. That's a very clear and potent protest, isn't it?

In verse 9, Pharaoh said the words of God were deceptive words. You couldn't trust them. And Moses appears here to be wondering if that might actually be true. He has not lived up to his word of rescue.

He has not followed through his words with action. He has done nothing at all. And the end result is that Pharaoh appears to have won the day. However, friends, we must not finish this story without hearing how God responds back.

[11 : 41] Look and listen to chapter 6, verse 1. God says, Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go.

And by a mighty hand he will drive them out of this land. Now when God called Moses in chapter 3, he told them the king of Egypt would not let the people go unless he was compelled by a mighty hand.

In the same verses, he told them that he would stretch out his hand and strike Egypt with wonders, so that only after that would he let the Israelites go. However, he also said in chapter 4, verse 21, that he would harden the heart of Pharaoh.

And God's point here in chapter 6, verse 1, is that the former is yet to happen. God has been keeping his word. He has just not been keeping it in the way that Moses would like.

However, there can be no doubt that the hand of Pharaoh that has a sword in it will not be the hand that triumphs. No, it will be God's mighty hand that will win the day.

[12 : 47] Now God may seem to be weak. He may seem to be quiet. He may even seem to be absent here. But he's very present. He has heard the cries of his people. He still sees them.

He still knows them. And he will still rescue them. So there's the story, friends. And I'd like now to think about why God has put this chapter here. My own view is that it is here to show the power of Pharaoh.

It is here also to show the weakness of the rescuers, Moses and Aaron, and the weakness of the people of God in the face of this overwhelming power.

Pharaoh is a self-confident king in his own place in time and space. And he is overwhelming in his grip on power in his own kingdom.

By painting this picture for us, the chapter sets before us the impossibility of the task at hand. No human being is going to be able to resist this man in this place.

[13 : 49] No people power will overthrow his reign. He is not a spongy, weak-kneed diplomat or politician. He is hard-hearted, callous, a despotic tyrant, with a hand raised in defiance against God.

Only some greater power, some greater hand, will be able to remove him and demolish him and diminish him. That's the purpose of this chapter, to provide a backdrop for the display of God's power, which is about to come.

This chapter has Moses and Aaron and Israel brought low and Pharaoh exalted in order that the Lord might be known and revealed. And the end result is that we will know that the hero of this story is not Moses, but Yahweh, the Lord.

Now, having said this, friends, I want you to notice some common patterns. You see, this chapter has some marvellous patterns in it that we have seen before in the Bible and we will see in the rest of the Bible.

They are timeless patterns. And I want to start with the first one, patterns we see here of God. You see, in this chapter, we see a God who has spoken his word, but he's not yet acted on it.

[15:04] And he's not yet acted on it as Moses would have expected and as we expected. In other words, he's a God who doesn't appear to be doing anything. And this is the case, even though his people are suffering terribly.

I mean, this is oppression on oppression. And here at the same time is a God who holds back, who's waiting, who does things that we cannot comprehend and Moses can't comprehend. Now, if you haven't, friends, if you have not met this side of God yet, then let me tell you, there is every chance that you will at some point in your life. I have met this side of God before and I know some of you have.

You see, at some point in your life, you'll be convinced about God's will in some area and you'll wait. And you'll wait. And you'll wait. And you'll wait. And you'll wait for it.

And then you'll search for God on this topic. But he will seem distant and silent. And you'll want to accuse him.

[16:08] And you'll be tempted to abandon him. However, such passages as these ones tell us that he does know what he's doing. He has a plan and a purpose. He has his own way of doing things.

And it may not be our way, but he will so act in his world that his word is kept. He states his reputation on his word. You see, God is not a liar.

He gives no deceptive words. Pharaoh is not right. He is not a deceiver in his speech and conduct. He speaks and it is true.

He is the Lord of his word. The second pattern I want you to notice is the pattern we see in Moses. Moses is clearly presented as God's prophet here.

He stands in God's place. He speaks God's word. But it is not all smooth sailing, is it? After all, the person to whom the very prophecy is directed has absolutely no interest in it.

[17:10] He does not listen. And the people he represents don't appreciate what he's doing. And God doesn't respond as expected.

And the end result is here is God's prophet. He's on the receiving end from both Pharaoh and the people. He's caught between all parties and the God he represents. He says, friends, the role of a prophet, a speaker of the word of God, is a tough gig, isn't it?

It is one of hardship and difficulty and unpredictability and it often ends in suffering or death. If you want just a snapshot of it, read Jeremiah. He laments it.

He says it's a tough job. This was the life of the prophet in the Old Testament. It's the life of the prophet in the New. And it's the role of all who are given God's word to speak.

Not just the people in pulpits, but friends, you as well. For you are given the role to speak God's word to your friends, your family, your world. Not just Bible study leaders, not just teachers of children, but you.

[18:17] You are the speakers of God's word. And God's word today, to all of us who are engaged in this ministry of bringing the word of God to God's world, is that the word that God has given us to speak will often be one that our hearers would prefer not to hear.

Perhaps some of you have tried it out on your friends and family and have met with God's word for us today is the pattern that we see here in Exodus 5.

And it is that we may often experience this ourselves. You see, not everyone to whom we speak God's word will want to hear. Some people to whom we speak God's word will oppose it without mercy.

And this is happening as some people today speak the word of God in some countries today. Some people will not appreciate it.

And even some of God's people will not appreciate what we say to them that God says. And sometimes God himself will not respond in the ways that we expect despite us having been faithful in speaking this word.

[19 : 28] And at other times we may find ourselves sandwiched between God, the people of God, the people that God wants to speak to, and even God's people. And our ministry of the word of God may often bring us hardship and suffering and sometimes even ostracism and death.

Some people today are dying because they want to bring the word of God to the world. And at times we may even want to accuse God of wrongdoing.

But friends, God knows what he is doing. And his word goes out from our mouths and it will go forth from our mouth with the power of God's spirit.

It does what God wants it to do. And our task is not to make it happen. Our task is to faithfully speak that word.

Our task is to faithfully live that word. And our task is to trust the God whose word it is. Now there are other patterns to notice here. Did you notice the people of God in the story?

[20 : 35] They are slaves who do the work at brick kilns. They are the ones who sort of got to scramble around throughout Egypt gathering up straw. They are the ones who are caught in the crossfire.

Then life is not always easy for them to understand. And so it has often been for the people of God. You see, for as the people of God attempt to live lives for God, they often find themselves caught up in conflicts that are much bigger than them.

Like Job. They often cannot see behind the scenes and understand what is going on. They've just got bricks to make. And straw to gather.

And often they will not see the end of the conflict in their own lifetime. And like Job, they are to continue to trust that God knows what he's doing. And that right will eventually triumph.

Now let me say, if I can to you very frankly, that this is one of the great difficulties of living the Christian life. It is the difficulty of not really knowing sometimes what is going on.

[21 : 36] The difficulty is, you see friends, we are caught in the crossfire. And often that will mean difficulty in making sense out of God and his purposes in our situation on this day. And in this situation, I often have no recourse but to cry out to the God who hears and remembers.

Friends, I have a prayer that I've been praying for years. I have not yet seen it answered. I long for it almost daily. And at times I simply have to trust that God knows, that he hears.

And I have to cling to a sure and certain knowledge that he has loved me in Jesus and he has my best interests in mind. Friends, I don't want to finish here today. After all, I've indicated that I think the focus of this chapter is Pharaoh.

I think Pharaoh is also a pattern. See, I think Pharaoh here in this chapter is a pattern of anti-God and anti-Christ forces in this world.

The Pharaoh here who speaks and lives does so as a person who does not know God and has no interest in knowing him.

[22 : 46] He is merely interested in his own plans and his own place in the world. And when he hears about the God of Israel, he is interested in opposing him because he has his own ways and he does not like God's ways.

He will do anything in order to get his own plans fulfilled. And if God stands in the way, if the people of God stand in the way, he will oppose the people of God and he will take on God himself.

He will demand that God bows before his will. He will demand that God's people give their allegiance to him rather than to their God. In other words, what he is trying to do is to take the place of God in the world and among the people of God and in the affections of the people of God and in the allegiance of the people of God.

And such an attitude from Pharaoh places him in direct confrontation with God. And that is a confrontation that this Pharaoh will sometimes seem to win. And passages such as the book of Isaiah and Daniel and two Thessalonians tell us that there have been many such people in our world.

These passages tell us that often they seem to win. They will often persecute the people of God and get away with it as people are doing this very day. They will often kill the people of God as

people are doing this very day and seem to get away scot-free.

[24 : 11] Such agents of chaos, such antichrists are at work in our world this very day. And in some places their hands are filled with Pharaoh's weapons of physical torture and murder.

And in other places this day their hands are filled with legal weapons that constrict and confine. And I suspect the day is coming in Australia when we will see them at work.

In other places their hands are filled with theological weapons which confound and deceive the people of God. So what do we do in the face of such agents of enormous evil, such opponents of God?

Well the New Testament and the Old points us in a number of directions first. You need to hear that God will judge. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 and chapter 2 Paul tells us the day will come when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven.

and on that day he will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. It is uncompromising.

[25 : 24] He will bring relief to the people afflicted and suffering and they will marvel at him in his presence among all his people. God will judge.

2. We should be determined to stand firm. See friends, we have it relatively easy here in Australia. That day may come to an end. It has come to an end in other places around the world.

We need to be determined to stand fast. You see, we have been chosen by God to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So let us not side with those opposed to God and his purposes.

Let's not cave into their temporary power. Using the words of 2 Thessalonians, my sisters and brothers in Christ, you are beloved of the Lord.

He has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

He has called you through proclamation of the gospel so that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 37] Christ. This is who you are in his eyes. Therefore, stand firm. Hold on to Christ and the traditions that have been taught to us by God through his apostles.

And as Paul says, may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace comfort our hearts this day.

And particularly, friends, may he comfort the hearts of our suffering brethren throughout the world.

And may he establish us in every good work and word while we wait for his Son from heaven.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.