

Bible Study #08 Exodus 4.18–31 02–16–2021

God's intention for Moses had been stated in 3:10. His mission was to go to Pharaoh so that he could lead God's people out of Egypt. The preceding section has clarified the roles of Moses and Aaron, and now the narrative follows Moses' return there in order to fulfil his divinely appointed mission.

On return from Horeb, Moses went with a request to his father-in-law. He did not explain fully his reasons, but rather expressed a wish to see if any of his people were still alive. The way it was stated in Hebrew is the same as that used by Joseph to ask about the condition of his father Jacob (Gen. 45:3). His request did not distort the truth, for time had now gone past and he genuinely wanted to know how his people were doing.

The decision was made prior to the knowledge that no longer was he a wanted fugitive in Egypt. Jethro's response was to encourage him to go with his blessing. The Hebrew expression is to go in, or with, peace. Moses was told by the Lord to return to Egypt because the manhunt for him over the death of the Egyptian (2:15) had subsided, and it was safe to go back.

In the account of Moses' arrival in Midian, no reference is made to his explaining the reason why he fled from Egypt. The text does not provide any information about how much Jethro's family knew of the situation in Egypt.

Moses made the necessary preparations for travel to Egypt. While the birth of his first son, Gershom, has been noted already (2:21-22), no mention has been made of the birth of his second son, Eliezer (cf. 18:4). Presumably, both sons were taken back to Egypt, and this explains the use of the plural 'sons'. With a donkey for transport, Moses set off for Egypt with his wife and sons, plus 'the staff of God' in his hand.

It is significant that the staff did not belong to Moses. It was the instrument through which God was going to display his superiority over Pharaoh and over the Egyptian gods. Before setting out on his journey God told Moses some further facts about his mission. In particular, he was instructed to perform in Pharaoh's presence all 'the wonders' that he had been empowered to do.

The word 'wonder' occurs 36 times in the Old Testament, almost half of them (17) being in reference to the miraculous events recorded in Exodus. These wonderful deeds have already been called 'the wonders' (3:20), and 'signs' (4:8, 9, 17), while later they will be called 'judgments'(7:4).

These terms, which are practically synonymous, all refer to the extraordinary, divinely initiated actions that were intended to show to the Egyptians that the Lord was truly God. God's actions extended further still. He would act judicially against Pharaoh, an obstinate sinner, by further hardening his heart. This passage, and Paul's use of it by the apostle Paul in Romans 9:14-18, raises issues about divine action and human response.

Both are in view here, as they are in Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-23). Peter related Jesus' death to the eternal purpose of God ('This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge'), but he held those involved in the crucifixion responsible for their actions ('And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross').

The heart of Pharaoh, a rebellious sinner, was further hardened in order to show God's power and that his name might be proclaimed in all the earth (Exod. 9:16). The Lord's message for Pharaoh attributed a very specific status to Israel, namely, that of being the Lord's son, his first-born.

The relationship between God and Israel was of father/son (see Deut. 32:6; Jer. 3:4; 31:9), and this explains the Lord's complaints against his people for acting in a 'foolish and unwise' manner' (Deut. 32:6), or of being 'a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful' (Deut. 32:20; see also Isa. 1:4). However, added to this concept was the designation 'first-born', the only time this expression is used of Israel in the Old Testament.

The first-born of a family in Israel occupied a position of privilege (the law regarding the first-born is set out in Deut. 21:15-17). Here, Israel having been chosen by God, and as the first fruits among the nations (Jer. 2:3), is to be publicly acknowledged as having that status.

The contrast between Israel and Egypt is clear. Pharaoh is to be told that God's son, the first-born, has to be sent away to worship him (see the earlier reference in 3:18 to a three-day journey into the desert). On the other hand, Egypt's first-born son is going to undergo the judgment of death because of Pharaoh's refusal to accede to God's demand.

This is the first of five occurrences of the combination of the verbs 'refuse' and the verb to 'send' in the narrative in Exodus detailing Pharaoh's obstinate refusal to allow Israel to go and worship the Lord (Exod. 4:23; 7:14; 8:2; 9:2; 10:4). The repetition of this idea highlights the consequences of Pharaoh's heart being hardened.

Verses 24-26 comprise a unit that has produced much discussion, and probably no single section of Exodus is more difficult to explain. Among the questions that have arisen are the subject of the meeting with God (Moses or Gershom), the person circumcised (Gershom, or his younger brother, Eliezer), and the one at whose feet the foreskin was thrown (Moses, Gershom, or Eliezer).

The overall understanding of the passage has also produced very different interpretations. Here one particular view will be given, with footnote references to other discussions. Some of the main points can be summarised: The incident occurs as Moses is returning to Egypt from Midian in order to take up the leadership of Israel.

Negotiations with Pharaoh for the release of the people and the subsequent events at the time of the exodus. In the context, the pointers are to Moses as the person with whom the Lord met and whom He threatened with death.

At that time, one of Moses' sons had not been circumcised as set out in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:10-14). The essential link between circumcision and the covenant was evident, and this was repeated by Stephen when in his speech to the Sanhedrin he reminded them that God 'gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision' (Acts 7:8).

The failure to perform the rite of circumcision, like the absence of circumcision, was punishable by death. This means that the threat was that the token cutting of the flesh in circumcision would become total in the cutting off by death.

Moses could not become the leader of Israel if he himself or his sons did not bear the sign of the covenant in their bodies. It would have been completely incongruous for him to assume this leadership role if he was not faithful to the demands of the covenant. Hence, the Lord met with him on the way to Egypt and tried to kill him.

While on the way back to Egypt, at a lodging place, Moses came face to face with God. The verb used here for 'meet' seems to have been practically synonymous with the other more common verb for 'meet,' as is shown by the use of both verbs in verse 27 ('Go into the wilderness to meet Moses So he went and met him ...').

While a 'lodging place' could denote some form of inn, more likely it simply speaks of a campsite or some form of temporary hut. The location was 'in the desert' (v. 27), an expression that refers to an uninhabited area. There God met him and 'tried' to kill him. Rather than suggesting that God attempted to kill him but was not able to accomplish this, it is wise to follow the NIV and accept that it was about to happen. The penalty for covenantal disobedience was death. No indication is given of how the judgment was to be carried out. It could have been by an illness.

The LXX says that ‘the angel of the Lord met him’, which may have been an attempt to weaken the force of the MT expression, and possibly also to link it with the appearance of God to Jacob at the brook (Gen. 32:22-32). Previously, Pharaoh had tried to kill Moses (Exod. 2:15). Now it is the Lord who did so.

Moses’ wife, Zipporah, intervened in the situation, and with a flint knife cut off her son’s foreskin. The use of flint as a cutting tool for the administration of circumcision is also mentioned in Joshua 5:2-3. No explanation is given of why a flint knife in place of a metal one was used. The ‘son’ was most likely the younger one, Eliezer (Exod. 18:4).

Here is a possible scenario for this story. Gershom the elder son had been circumcised, but, because of Zipporah’s opposition, the second son, Eliezer, had not. Now, without any prompting but realizing the danger of the situation, Zipporah proceeds to perform the circumcision. The cut foreskin she throws at Moses’ ‘feet’, which is probably a euphemism for the genital area.

Her action was probably more than just ‘touching.’ Rather, the way in which she showed her displeasure at having to perform this ritual was by ‘throwing’. She also made a statement to explain the situation. To Moses she said: ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.’ By this act of blood-shedding she avoided divine judgment, and in doing so saved her husband. For a second time, Moses is saved by a woman (cf. 2:1-10).

The consequence of the action was that ‘he let him alone’. Though the subject of the verb is not stated, the NIV rendering ‘the Lord’ is probably right. It seems as if the act of circumcision cancelled the attack on Moses, so that, if it was an induced illness, he recovered. The second sentence in this verse picks up Zipporah’s statement referring to a ‘bridegroom of blood.’

Whatever else this phrase meant, it certainly reinforced the concept that circumcision was a vital matter for the people of the covenant. Specifically, the text says that this statement was so ‘because of the circumcision.’ The circumcision of Eliezer was essential if Moses was to lead his people out of their slavery. According to 18:1–14 Zipporah and the sons returned to live with Jethro in Midian.

The text now brings Moses and Aaron together as they jointly take up the role that God intended for them (see vv. 14-16). By specific divine instruction, Aaron went into the ‘desert’ to meet Moses. They met at ‘the mountain of God’. Aaron had to leave Egypt, presumably secretly, in order to come into personal contact with his brother again.

The narrative here presupposes instruction had been given to Aaron, and also more precise directions as to where he was to find his brother. They met and greeted another with a kiss (cf. the same action when Jacob and Esau met up with one another, Gen. 33:4).

Moses then related to his brother ‘all the words’ that had been part of his commission, and also ‘all the signs’ concerning which he had received instruction. The Hebrew Text is terse here, highlighting the ‘words’ and ‘signs’ that were going to be so central in the work ahead in Egypt. Spoken words were going to be reinforced by miraculous signs.

Now it was necessary for Moses and Aaron to let the elders of Israel know of God’s intentions for His people. Hence they gathered together the elders (referred to already in 3:18), and communicated to them all that Moses had been told. Aaron now assumed the role of acting as Moses’ ‘prophet’ (see vv. 14-17), and he performed miracles (v. 30).

Earlier Moses had been concerned that the people would not believe him (v. 1), but now the signs had convinced them of the truth of his message and so they believed. The response of the people even went further. Hearing about how God had visited them and taken notice of their affliction, ‘they bowed down and worshipped.’

The two verbs in this expression are always used in conjunction with one another ('bowed down', 'worshipped'). They occur at important occasions in Old Testament history and especially mark out the devout worship of the Lord and obeisance to him (cf. Gen. 24:26; Exod. 12:27; 2 Chron. 29:30). Later the people sin against the Lord, at this stage they accepted the message from him and responded with adoration.

The stage is now set for 'The Rest of the Story' as Paul Harvey would say. Next we study Exodus 5:1–23.