

Unexpected Hardship

Exodus 5-6

As we continue our sermon series on the book of Exodus this morning we're going to talk about how hard it can be to face unexpected circumstances, especially those that involve hardship and suffering.

When you become a Christian, one of the things you learn is that God loves you, that God is good, and that God wants good things for your life. He loves us so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross to forgive our sins. God is a good God and he gives good gifts to his people to bless them in many ways. The Bible is filled with stories and promises about this.

So if you've had a hard life, you would expect things to get better when you begin to follow God. And oftentimes they do. And if you've had an easy life, you'd expect things to continue or maybe even get better. You believe in God, you believe his goodness, and you believe his promises. Life should be really good...

But then the unexpected happens and you face some kind of hardship. Your kid ends up with a rare disease. Your company moves and you lose your job. Your wife gets in a car accident. Your husband tells you he wants a divorce. A fire burns your house down. A family member gets mad at you and quits talking with you. You go into the doctor and find out you have cancer... I looked through our church directory and could think of some kind of hardship in just about every family. Some kind of suffering that each of us has had to face. And in many cases it's not just one, but several.

Going through unexpected hardship can be really hard to work through in your relationship with God. Oftentimes it doesn't make sense. There doesn't seem to be any reason for the suffering or any purpose for it and it can make you question God and his goodness.

Today we're going to see the people of Israel face an unexpected hardship that really threw them off course. They responded the same way I think we feel like responding when bad things happen in our lives. But I also want us to see what God was doing so we can see why they could have responded differently and why we can learn to do the same.

We saw last week how God called Moses to go to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery. Moses was very reluctant to do so, but God overcame his objections and he finally went. He arrived in Egypt with his brother Aaron, gathered the elders of Israel and told them all that happened and all that God promised to do. He also showed them the signs God had given him and the people believed. It says at the end of chapter 4 that they bowed their heads and worshipped. This was the beginning of their relationship with Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So chapter 4 ends up on a high note. The people finally have hope after 400 years of slavery. God promised to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and bring them to the land of Canaan – a land of great abundance, flowing with milk and honey. He would strike Egypt with a mighty hand and Pharaoh would let them go. Incredible hope and promise – they had endured so much, but their misery was coming to an end now that Yahweh was with them and had sent Moses.

So with great expectations of what God was going to do, Moses and Aaron went to speak to Pharaoh and that's where we pick up the story.

Read Exodus 5:1-5.

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" ² But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." ³ Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." ⁴ But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens." ⁵ And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!"

So Pharaoh said no. There was no way he was going to release his workforce to go into the wilderness for several days to worship a God he'd never heard of. It was a refusal. But it was also expected to happen – God told Moses it would happen. He said in Exodus 3:19-20: *"But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless*

compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.”

So they knew Pharaoh would say no, and now it was time to see the wonders God would do to strike Egypt and change Pharaoh’s mind. That’s what they were expecting, but something else happened instead.

Read Exodus 5:6-9.

The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, ⁷ “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. ⁸ But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ ⁹ Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.”

So Pharaoh didn’t just say no, he imposed a punishment on the people because of Moses and Aaron’s request. He enforced an impossible workload that made their situation worse than it was before. This would not have been expected and the next few verses show what happened.

Read Exodus 5:10-14.

¹⁰ So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. ¹¹ Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” ¹² So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. ¹³ The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.” ¹⁴ And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, “Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?”

So the people had to work harder than before and when they couldn’t meet their quota the Israelite foremen were beaten. They were very distraught, so they went to Pharaoh to plead for mercy.

Read Exodus 5:15-21.

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this?"¹⁶ No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people."¹⁷ But he said, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.'¹⁸ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks."¹⁹ The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, "You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day."²⁰ They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh;²¹ and they said to them, "The Lord look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."

Pharaoh was unrelenting and you can see that in their desperation the foremen turned against Moses and Aaron. Even Moses turned to despair...

Read Exodus 5:22-23.

²² Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?"²³ For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all."

God had met him in a powerful way at the burning bush and convinced him to go to Egypt. He gave him wonderful promises to tell the people, and they believed him, but now Moses was looking like a fraud. The hardship imposed by Pharaoh had destroyed his hope and he was accusing God of breaking his promises. Things were falling apart.

God was supposed to show up in a powerful way and set them free, but the only thing they could see was their suffering. The foremen were distraught and blamed Moses and Aaron, Moses was desperate and blamed God. In chapter 6 God told Moses to remind the people of his promises, but when he did they "*did not listen... because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.*" So they were checked out. Their suffering caused them to lose all hope and they no longer believed in the promises of God.

Unexpected hardship can be really hard to grapple with in your relationship with God. But now I want us to step back and look at things from God's perspective. After Moses cried out to God, this is how God responded...

Read Exodus 6:1-8.

But the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."

² God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. ⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. ⁵ Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. ⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸ I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'"

From God's perspective, nothing had changed. He was doing exactly what he promised he would do. Pharaoh's refusal and demand for bricks without straw wasn't a surprise and it didn't change anything about who God was or what he was going to do. It didn't affect any of his promises or deter him in any way. God was going to do what he promised he would do. He would be faithful. That's who he was: "I am the LORD." He wanted Moses and the people of Israel to know who he was and that he would be faithful even in the midst of hardship. And we know he was. In fact, it was the very next morning that he poured out the first plague.

Unexpected hardship can fill us with doubt and desperation in our relationship with God because when we look at what we're going through, it can seem impossible and overwhelming. We can forget about God's promises and goodness. We can even get angry and blame him or call him a liar.

But God has proven himself to be faithful time and time again like we've seen today. He was showing Moses and the Israelites they could trust him even when things seemed impossible. It would happen again when they came to the Red Sea, and when they were in the desert without any water, and when they made it to Canaan and saw it was full of powerful kingdoms and giants. God would be faithful to fulfill his promises. That generation of Israelites never really got it even though God always came through on his promises.

What about us? God doesn't promise that we will never face hardship and suffering, but he does promise that he will be faithful. He will be with us. He will give us everything we need. Nothing will separate us from his love. And he will use all things, even our suffering, and turn it for good.

Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:7 *"for we walk by faith, not by sight."* This is part of growing in spiritual maturity. When hardships come we aren't expecting, we learn to cling to the promises of God rather than being overcome by them. In 2 Cor. 4:16-18 it says, *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."*

One of the greatest gifts God has given us in this area is the support and encouragement of one another. We need fellow believers to remind us of who God is, what he's done, and what he will do. We need each other. Maybe you're kind of a loner and don't have the Christian support you need when unexpected hardships come. I encourage you to engage in opportunities to build relationships with other believers – maybe that's staying after church or going to a small group or Recharge. Maybe it's going out for coffee or having someone over for dinner.