

**Moses: When a Day Goes from Bad to Worse**  
**Hebrews 11:23-27, 12:1-2 and Exodus 5:1-23**  
**July 9, 2017**  
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Have you ever had a truly bad day? A day that went from bad to worse, a day like Alexander's? If so, you'll be able to identify with Moses.

As you'll recall from last week, Moses is finally, albeit reluctantly, on board with God's plan to deliver Israel from slavery. After leaving the mountain where he'd encountered God in the burning bush, Moses goes back to his father-in-law, Jethro, gets his blessing to leave Midian with his wife and sons and returns to Egypt. On the way Moses meets up with Aaron whom God had sent to meet his brother. It is always fascinating to see how God works from both ends of a situation to work out his plans. When Moses and Aaron arrive in Egypt, they convene a meeting of Israel's elders where they reveal God's plan to liberate Israel from slavery. They show them the signs of God's power. The Israelites believe, and now the easy part is over and the hard part starts. It's time to go to Pharaoh. And, that's where Moses' bad day begins.

It's a dramatic scene as these two Hebrew octogenarians stand before the most powerful man on earth and dare to proclaim, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" I doubt it surprises anyone that Pharaoh's response is decidedly negative, even cynical, but in actuality, Pharaoh's response exposes more truth than he realizes. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go." He refuses to recognize the name or the request brought in that name, but he does understand that Moses and Aaron are not presenting him with a request but rather with a mandate from one claiming to be greater than himself. And Pharaoh can't even imagine giving credence to that.

Theologian F.B. Meyer states that, "to appreciate the audacity of [God's] demand we must remember the unbridled power and authority claimed by the Egyptian monarchs...For him great Egypt existed. For him all other men lived, suffered and died. For him the mighty Nile flowed...For him vast armies of priests and magicians and courtiers wrought and ministered."

Moses and Aaron had barely exited the royal palace before Pharaoh reacts to God's decree by issuing a decree of his own: Hebrew slaves would still have the

same daily quota of bricks to make, but now, instead of straw being provided for them, as had been done previously, they must go out, gather the straw themselves, and still make their quota. As desperate as their situation was before, it has just gotten a lot worse. Pharaoh makes the Hebrews' slavery even more bitter, their bondage heavier and their tasks more difficult. Rather than releasing them to go and worship, Pharaoh does the opposite, tightening his grip. Their additional labor is intended to give them no time to consider such preposterous ideas as Moses and Aaron are proposing.

What had been difficult now becomes impossible. All day long they try to carry out Pharaoh's order, to meet their daily brick quota while having to gather their own straw. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, the Hebrew supervisors decide to make a direct appeal to Pharaoh. The result is just what you might expect, with Pharaoh refusing to listen or to back down on his inhumane treatment. As the foremen are leaving Pharaoh's house, they come across Moses and Aaron. These two men who had brought a word of such hope to the Hebrews are now accused of inciting an action that threatens the entire Israelite community. Justice calls for Moses and Aaron to suffer the consequences of what they have done. Their leadership is in jeopardy before they're even out of the starting gate. Pharaoh has succeeded in sharply dividing the Hebrew community.

Already there are two important themes to pay attention to. First, Moses and Aaron are having a bad day, a day that is quickly going from bad to worse *even though they are doing exactly what God called them to do*. The presence of problems does not necessarily indicate that we are not in God's will. Sometimes, we will encounter problems precisely because we *are* in God's will. God does not wave a magic wand, so that freedom for Israel is easily won. This is a hard, painful endeavor. There will be no freedom without cost and sacrifice.

Second, this section of the narrative paints a stark and accurate picture of oppressive systems and the bullies that enforce them, no matter what century they inhabit. Pharaoh is an experienced oppressor. His is a pyramidal system whereby the few benefit from the labor of many. By depleting the energy of the oppressed, the threat of organized resistance is decreased. Petitions and demands are dismissed out of hand. Giving in at any point is considered a sign of weakness. Any sign of resistance results in a tightening of the grip. The oppressed must learn that their well-being depends exclusively on Pharaoh's goodwill. The message is clear: don't mess with the system. Get the victims thinking that things can never be better than they are. As the saying goes, don't bite the hand that feeds you. Help them see that those who claim to be their liberators are actually making their

oppression much worse than it would otherwise be. Pharaoh is so successful in fostering this dependent, victimized belief that later, the peoples' complaint in the wilderness will be that they never had it so good as when they were in Egypt.

Pharaoh's charge that this request for time away to worship comes because the people are lazy is also typical of oppressors. The people aren't actually oppressed; they're just inherently lazy and resort to calling themselves victims so they won't have to work so hard. The point is to transfer the problem from the oppressor to the oppressed. By making the issue a character flaw in the victim, the "powers that be" are then relieved of any burden or responsibility for their fate. A faulty work ethic—that's the Hebrews' real problem!

Another successful tactic is that oppressors prey on the oppressed by soliciting people who are willing to serve as foremen, actually collaborators who help create internal divisions among the community. Hebrews who have "sold out to the system" are turned against other Hebrews. These supervisors provide fellow Hebrews with walking examples of the "opportunity to improve their standard of living" if they will just get in line, accept the system of exploitation and participate in it, according to the oppressor's rules, of course. It is an effective strategy to keep slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves. "Divide-and-conquer" has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression from time immemorial.

The language of oppressors and slavery is not as common today as it once was. But, we talk a lot about bullies, about abusers, about predators, about people who manipulate and exploit others—these are all modern-day pharaohs, and their tactics haven't changed a bit. Blame the victim. Isolate the oppressed. Demean their character. "The poor won't work! Other people started with nothing and they turned out okay, so what's wrong with you?" The Exodus narrative invites us to name our oppressive systems, to tell the truth about our economic structures that depend on a lot of people staying poor so the rich can get richer. We need to tell the truth that opportunity does not exist equally for all people. The playing field is not, and never has been, level. And, we especially need to be truthful about our biases—that we think we know what people "deserve." Poverty, racism, materialism, elitism, lack of basic health care, education and safety—these are all forms of slavery, and every one of us is trapped inside one or more of them.

Already Moses is disenchanted with this task God has assigned him, and he's certainly not about to take the blame for the lack of results. Moses takes the foremen's complaints to heart and turns right around and complains to God. Perhaps God didn't think this thing through thoroughly enough. But, then again,

perhaps Moses and the Hebrews presumed that they knew how and when God would work. Moses and Aaron brought them the good news of their impending liberation; well, where was it?

God had told Moses to expect resistance from Pharaoh, and this is a reminder to us all when we encounter obstacles and run into roadblocks: just because God is at work doesn't mean God is acting according to our plans or our timetable. Even when things seem to be going from bad to worse, when God's action seems delayed, will we trust that God is working?

Think for just a minute about how Moses must have experienced his audience with Pharaoh and the complaints of the Hebrews. I can imagine that all those memories of rejection and inadequacy came flooding back. He must have had a strong urge to run and hide, just like he had done before. The quiet life of a shepherd might have been looking pretty good right about now. And, Moses did run, but this time he ran straight to the source of his strength. Moses poured out his anxiety to the only one who could answer his questions or alleviate his fears. "Why have you brought trouble on the people, Lord? Why is it you have sent me?"

Moses is asking, in essence, "where did I go wrong?" He'd been obedient and done everything right, standing before Pharaoh and delivering God's message. But, things didn't go well, and when things don't go the way we think they should, we usually start asking the why and how questions: "Why me? Why now? Why did I get my hopes up? Why did I think this would work? Why did I ever take this job or get into this relationship? How am I going to get through this?"

God's response? "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. For with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land." And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the Lord." (6:1-2)

God does not reprimand Moses. He doesn't shame him or slap him on the wrist. God reassures Moses of God's intent and purposes. Instead of criticizing Moses for asking, "Why?", God says, wait and watch. It is time to get Pharaoh's attention. It's time to show him the mighty power of Israel's God.

We're going to have bad days, days when we will wish we could leave it all, and move to Australia. On those days, our best bet is to run to God with our fears and worries and recognize that God's plans and purposes have not changed. No matter how beaten down we feel, how crushed, how broken or desperate, God is at work. God cares and sees us and hears us. God's compassion for us is

overflowing. No matter what our problem or sin or fear or shame, God desires to help us. We are more important to God than what we have done or accomplished, which can be a hard truth to live into in a world that constantly measures us by our accomplishments or lack thereof.

God reminds Moses that he is the Lord. Too many times we focus on the difficulties of the moment rather than the God of the universe. Our eyes belong on God. Remember! Remember who God is. When your day goes from bad to worse, when your schedule presses, when your prospects thin, when your hope burns low, when people disappoint you, when events don't go your way, when dreams die, when the walls close in, when the prognosis seems grim, when your heart breaks, fix your eyes on Jesus. Look at him and keep on looking at him, no matter what. Amen.