

## Pharaoh Declares War

TEXT: Exodus 5:1-21

Words for kids: Pharaoh, God, war,

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Scr. Reading: Ex 5:1-21

Getting Out: Exodus, pt 1

*Exodus 15:1-7* Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider<sup>1</sup> he has thrown into the sea. <sup>2</sup> The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. <sup>3</sup> The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name. <sup>4</sup> "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. <sup>5</sup> The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. <sup>6</sup> Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. <sup>7</sup> In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.

Our story opens with the word "Afterward," an obvious link with what is prior. God's people, Israel, are slaves. They are the free labor force and the economic backbone of the most powerful nation on earth, Egypt. They've been living in Egypt for 4 centuries, enslaved for a good portion of that time; but recently God had begun to move. He selected, prepared, and called a liberator to go and free them—Moses, along with his brother, Aaron. He furnished Moses and Aaron with specific promises of blessing and signs of His presence and power in order to reassure them and convince the people. Just days ago, perhaps hours, Moses and Aaron had arrived in Egypt, met with the people, and told them everything God had said (e.g., 3:7-9, 4:21-23). "Afterward," they gain an audience with Pharaoh himself, and Mission Liberation begins.

5 scenes:

- M&A before Pharaoh
- Pharaoh to the taskmasters
- The taskmasters to the people
- The Israelite foremen and Pharaoh
- The foremen to M&A

## MOSES & AARON AND PHARAOH (vv 1-5)

The drama opens with Moses and Aaron bringing their demands to Pharaoh, as God instructed them to do: "Thus says the LORD, the God of

Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'"

Pharaoh's reaction is swift and explicit: "I will not let Israel go." But notice that that is not the main part of his answer. His answer centers on Moses' opening words: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel." To Pharaoh, this is the key part of what they've said. It's an obvious challenge, and Pharaoh doesn't brush past it. He clearly gets the point that this demand comes directly from Yahweh, the God of Israel. Pharaoh realizes immediately that this demand isn't just about the economic impact of losing Egypt's free labor force; it's a supernatural conflict between rival gods.

"Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice? I do not know the Lord." Sarcasm. Arrogance. Defiance. Make no mistake – Pharaoh is not searching for information here. He is directly disrespecting and defying the Hebrews' so-called "god." And rightly so, according to the evidence. How powerful can the god of these enslaved people be?! Pharaoh is obviously much stronger than him. Just look what he has done to Yahweh's people for all these years. "Who is Yahweh?" Rightly understood, this question is a declaration of war.

The rest of the book of Exodus answers that question. In fact, answering this question becomes the focal point of what God is up to in this story.

**Exodus 6:7** *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.*

**Exodus 7:5** *The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."*

**Exodus 14:4** *"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD."*

**Exodus 14:18** *"And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."*  
(cf. also 7:17, 16:6, 16:12, 29:46)

Moses and Aaron have come to know at least this much about Yahweh: He must be obeyed. In verse 3 they respond with a gentle warning: "Please let us go sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with

pestilence or with the sword.” The “us” in jeopardy toward the end of the verse includes everyone standing there—Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh himself: “Let us go or God will become angry with us—including you.”

But Pharaoh rejects their warning and refuses to release his force of free laborers (vv 4-5).

### PHARAOH AND THE TASKMASTERS (vv 6-9)

In fact, he is so incensed by the challenge from Moses and Aaron, that same day he calls the slave managers in and gives them a crushing new policy. Verse 6 names two levels of management over the Hebrew workforce: task masters and foremen. Verse 14 indicates that “task masters” are Egyptian (i.e., “slave drivers” NIV) and “foremen” are Hebrews who had been installed by the Egyptians to oversee the rest of the slaves.

The new policy? No more straw for bricks with no change in output. Less building material, same quota. His rationale? “They are idle” (v 8). “They are bored. They have nothing better to do. That’s why they are saying, ‘Let us go enjoy a religious festival.’”

Pharaoh knows full well that’s not why they are asking for freedom to worship Yahweh. There’s an interesting play on words at the beginning of verse 9 with the word “work” (“labor” NAS). It’s the same root word used in 4:23, where God demands Pharaoh let the people go so they can “serve” Him. Pharaoh thrusts himself into direct conflict with God in competition over the question, “Whom will Israel serve?” Pharaoh knows full well that this is a showdown between he and Yahweh, and he takes out his defiance on Yahweh’s people.

APP: This still happens today, though usually on a smaller scale. When people have a problem with God, they take it out on His people. They can’t get at God Himself, so they will attack the nearest thing they can find to Him. This is nothing new.

**Matthew 24:9** *“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”*

When you lose respect or face ridicule because you are a Christian, do you ever think that this might not even be about you? It’s about their animosity toward God? “That’s not fair! I’m just an innocent bystander here!” So were the Israelites. But Pharaoh knew they were Yahweh’s people, and because he hated Yahweh, he hated them.

Friends, we must remember who THEY are, these unconverted people to whom we reach out in compassion – rebels, opposed to God. They are not neutral listeners, weighing evidence and making an impartial decision. Their hearts are hard. Unless God works a miracle – replacing their heart of stone with a heart of flesh – they will not believe. 21<sup>st</sup> Century AD America can be just as hostile to God as 15<sup>th</sup> Century BC Egypt.

But we must also remember who WE are. This is actually our calling – to stand in for God and represent Him to the world.

**2 Corinthians 5:20** *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

It’s actually RIGHT for people to view us in this kind of close connection with God. We are “God” to the world. We speak on His behalf. We are not saved to be bystanders as God saves the rest of the world. We are reconciled for reconciliation. We aren’t the ones speaking – it’s God making His appeal through us. And sometimes, when we encounter someone who has declared war on God, they will unleash their venom toward Him on us.

There’s another important word play in verse 9: “Let heavier work be laid on them”/“Make the work harder” (NIV). The word “hard/heavy” is the same word used various places for Pharaoh’s heart becoming hardened. He intends to make their work hard; God makes his heart hard, ironically bringing harsher punishment on himself. God does not let the suffering of His people go unnoticed. He will vindicate them and punish the ones who strike at them for His sake.

### THE TASKMASTERS AND THE PEOPLE (vv 10-14)

So the taskmasters and foremen report Pharaoh’s policy change to the people: less material, same quota. Notice how they put it: “Thus says

Pharaoh..." It's a deliberate, competitive echo of "Thus says the Lord" from v 1. Pharaoh has declared war on God, God's people and God's word.

The people scatter through the whole land of Egypt, looking for stubble for straw. Of course, this occupies a good portion of their time and energy, and they aren't able to meet their old quotas. But instead of adjusting their standards, Pharaoh's men beat Israel's foremen and insist that they up their performance.

### THE FOREMEN AND PHARAOH (vv 15-19)

So Israel's foremen go directly to Pharaoh with their concerns:

**Exodus 5:15b-16** *"Why do you treat your servants like this? <sup>16</sup> 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."*

"Pharaoh, why? No straw, same quotas, and beatings. This is not our fault! It's their fault!"

In this country, one man fills all three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. He makes the laws, he enforces them, and he is the supreme court where all appeals are heard and decided. And his prior policy stands (v 18): "No straw. Same quotas."

But he makes it worse with the rest of what he says: "Lazy—that's what you are. Lazy!" He rubs salt in their wounds by telling them they brought their troubles on themselves. He blames his new policy on them! It's like the unfaithful or abusive husband who says to his wife, "This is your fault. If you were more attractive or submissive or responsive, I wouldn't have hit you, left you, cheated on you..." If Pharaoh can frighten and manipulate the people back into submission, an organized resistance becomes impossible. The people will come to believe that their wellbeing rests entirely on the goodwill of Pharaoh. "Don't mess with the system – it's good enough the way it is." Mind games. Total manipulation. Pure evil.

### THE FOREMEN AND MOSES & AARON (vv 20-21)

Moses and Aaron are waiting for them outside the room, and instantly the harsh words spill out: "The Lord judge you. You've made us stink. You put a sword in their hand to kill us." They are actually calling down a curse on their new leaders: "Damn you, Moses and Aaron."

Of course, none of what they are saying is fair or true. Moses didn't put the sword in Pharaoh's hand – he has had that same sword hanging over his head most of his life! He's not the cause of this problem; he's a participant with them in this problem. They have it exactly backward: Moses is not the instrument of their oppression; he's God's instrument to relieve their oppression! But they can't see it.

Here's where we see the full devilish ingenuity of Pharaoh's plan. He's not just making their work harder. This new policy on Pharaoh's part is a ploy to drive a wedge between Israel and their new "deliverers," Moses and Aaron. And it works. Nothing extinguishes the hope of the people quite like distrust of the leader who first inspired it. Discredit the message by slinging mud at the messenger.

Their reaction is at least a little bit understandable. The Israelites' situation hasn't become better – it's gotten worse. Far worse!

How often does God work this way? He promises deliverance, but what comes first is deeper pain and more suffering. Abraham is promised a son, blessing, a great nation; but what he experiences is silence, barrenness, and the life of a nomad. Joseph dreams he'll lead his family, but what he experiences over the next decade is mistreatment, false accusation and slavery. Moses is God's appointed deliverer, but it's 80 years of futility before something happens.

I see a significant parallel between Israel's situation and the life of a Christian. We've heard God's promise of deliverance, we've trusted Him for the answers; so where is all this pain coming from?

**1 Peter 4:12-13** <sup>12</sup> *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*

**Acts 14:21-22** *When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to*

*continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*

**2 Timothy 3:12** *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

Three applications:

- Envision your future.

Christianity does not offer *Your Best Life Now*. It promises your best life *then...* and until then we're actually worse off than before. Egypt was not their Promised Land, and earth isn't ours! Heaven is! Imagine it: not some kind of cloudy, passive, boring place. (the last day of school!) Your Promised Land is a new creation, with relationships, service, love, a kind of resumption of the present without anything bad in it, and all with King Jesus at the center. Let your present suffering whet your appetite for your future blessing.

- Remember your Savior.

Pharaoh declares war on Yahweh in this text, but he is not the only warrior-god in this story. Exodus 15 depicts Yahweh Himself as the Divine Warrior:

**Exodus 15:6-7** *Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. <sup>7</sup> In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.*

This theme of Yahweh, the Divine Warrior moves through the OT, with God fighting against His enemies and sometimes against own wayward people. In the ministry of Jesus, it becomes clear that the real battle isn't with hostile kings and evil people; it's with the ancient serpent himself. And so the battle culminated in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, through which He defeated Satan completely:

**Colossians 2:14-15** *God has forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Christ.*

- Spread the news.

Friends, for the church, the battle continues. But unlike God's people in the OT who were at war with Egypt and the Canaanites, the church today must resist the devil (Eph 6:10-19; 1 Pt 5:8-9). We wage warfare against Satan and his kingdom primarily by spreading the gospel—the good news that the battle is over and the victory is won!

**Romans 10:13-15** <sup>13</sup> *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." <sup>14</sup> But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? <sup>15</sup> And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"*

APP: Do you see yourself as an ambassador for the King? Justice is coming, but amnesty is available to all who submit to the Warrior King through faith in Jesus! This is good news!

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