

No Deliverance and No Straw
Exodus 5:1-23
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Introduction: Dr. William Leslie and the Great Missions Disappointment¹

A man named Dr. William Leslie had wanted to be a pharmacist but felt God's call to become a medical missionary – and it was the classic “go to the darkest jungle in Africa to the isolated native tribe.” He met his wife on his first trip to the Congo, and they served together in an area called Vanga. They stayed in that post for 17 years, clearing enough jungle for a mission station to be built. Danger was everywhere: some of the surrounding villages still practiced cannibalism, they had to avoid leopards and buffalo, they even had to survive a hurricane the night before one of their children was born. By the end of those 17 years, Dr. Leslie had a falling out with the tribal leaders who asked him not to come back. So despite teaching the children of the village how to read and write and telling Bible stories, Dr. Leslie left for home feeling like a failure, like he had not made much of an impact, and he died a few years later.

I hope that no one has ever told you that following Jesus would make your life easy. I hope you haven't listened to too many testimonies of people who had terrible lives with all sorts of problems who turned everything over to the Lord and their problems vanished. And I hope you haven't found yourself promising someone that life in Christ makes this world's problems go away.

There are lots of amazing Gospel promises, like eternal life, forgiveness of sins, purpose, meaning, and abundant life. But abundant life does not imply that hardships will not come our way, simply that we hopefully will be better equipped to handle them. I remember R.C. Sproul saying, “I didn't have any problems until I became a Christian,” meaning that as a kid he sinned away but never worried about it, then he became a Christian and realized that he was suddenly conflicted about doing bad things. That's not to imply that unbelievers don't have problems, they certainly do, but Christians have those same problems with the added weight of following God's law and trying to live a life pleasing to Him. The really hard part is when Christians commit to step out in faith, they want to live in obedience and accomplish great things for God, and then they face opposition and they keep waiting for success that might not come in this life. It's hard to stay faithful in those times. It's hard not to doubt, not to yell at God and question everything.

Today's passage shows us a discouraged group of people who are just trying to obey God. They have done what God asked them to do, but have met stiff opposition and been hurt in the process. They lash out, they complain, they voice their discouragement, they have a hard time seeing how God could be working out His plans. Turn with me to Exodus chapter 5. If you'll remember, at the end of chapter 4, Moses has left Midian, gone back to Egypt, met up with Aaron, and the two of them have met with the elders of the Israelites and been well-received by the people. Today's passage is Moses and Aaron's first meeting with Pharaoh. The first 3 verses show Moses' first time in the Egyptian palace in 40 years, bringing the words of the Lord.

1) Thus Saith The Lord (vv. 1-3)

1 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

¹ Mark Ellis' article “Missionary died thinking he was a failure; 84 years later thriving churches found hidden in the jungle” found at blog.godreports.com.

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.”

“Let my people go!” We always think of Moses (really Aaron) thundering this phrase to Pharaoh. But they’re not asking for the total release of all the Hebrew slaves yet, they’re just asking for a little Retreat. “Hey Pharaoh, we need a week to go worship and feast to our God; no big deal, just 3 days out and 3 days back. We’ll be back before you know it. Oh, and if you don’t let us go, our God may get a little violent with us.” I have no idea why they added that last part, God hadn’t said that.

It’s not a shock in verse 2 when Pharaoh says, “Who is Yahweh? I don’t know him and I don’t have to listen to him. Nobody’s going anywhere.” Put yourself in Pharaoh’s shoes: you’re a god yourself (at least that’s what everybody tells you), Moses was a *shasu* (Egyptian for “wandering nomad”²), and now you’re being told that a god you’ve never heard of, a god of peasants, is demanding something of you. Of course you’re not going to give in! Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires employers to reasonably accommodate the religious beliefs and practices of employees.³ Apparently, they didn’t have anything like that back then in Egypt. “Let my workers out for a week of worship? Uh, nope, not happening.”

God’s people know His voice, as sheep know the voice of their shepherd, but those who are not God’s people have no problem saying they won’t obey what they don’t believe. So God’s request, spoken thru Aaron, has been presented. Pharaoh has already said no. Now we see in verses 4-11 that he goes way beyond that.

2) Thus Saith The Pharaoh (vv. 4-11)

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!” **6** 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.” **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.’”

When companies are faced with labor unhappiness and demands for change, they can go 1 of 3 ways: 1) try to capitulate, make some changes, and give in to some of the workers’ demands, 2) ignore them, pretend there’s no problem, just keep everything the same, or 3) Pharaoh’s tactic: make conditions so much worse that they quit complaining about what it used to be like. “You thought making bricks was hard? Now you have to gather the straw too, we’re not going to baby you anymore by supplying the straw.” Of course, Pharaoh’s not an employer but a dictator and a ruthless slave owner. Any sign of resistance will be met with a tightening of the grip. And, of course, the added kicker for this extra work is that Pharaoh probably knows that this will pit the average Israelite against his leaders; the message is: “The guys claiming to be your liberators are making it so much worse for you.” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The Pharaohs had a favorite and

² Robert Barnes’ article “A Wandering Jew” in February 2001’s edition of *Tabletalk* magazine.

³ <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/fs-religion.cfm>

effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves. The divide-and-conquer technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression.”⁴

So we have Pharaoh’s answer: “You’re lazy and you’re a bunch of liars; you’re manipulative trying to get out of work. I’m going to punish you for even daring to suggest a holiday.” He has to protect his country, the Egyptian way of life. It’s the same reason the South resisted ending slavery before the Civil War: they couldn’t imagine how the country could prosper without slave labor. Pharaoh needed the people to live in fear of him with no thoughts of freedom to cloud their heads.

So we find out in the next dozen verses that the strategy works, crushing the spirits of the Hebrew people and even their leader:

3) Thus Complaineth The Israelites (vv. 12-23)

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?” 15 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.” 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.”

This has become a common saying: “make bricks without straw.” It refers to someone trying to do their job without the necessary tools. I’ve known government contractors and other professionals who have told me stories of how their companies had to downsize the workforce but keep up with the same work load, so they had to add someone else’s job duties to their own; it must have felt like adding that extra step of finding the straw to make the bricks. I’m sure many of you have felt or can imagine how your job would feel like making bricks without straw. I think teachers have become experts at making bricks without straw having to teach online during this quarantine.

Pharaoh commanded his taskmasters to double the workload as a way to punish the people. When the people couldn’t keep up, the taskmasters beat the Israelite foremen for the failures of the people. So the foremen went to Pharaoh to complain, but when he refused to change his mind, they went to Moses and Aaron and accused them of turning their masters against them: “They want to kill us now and you’ve given them the sword to do it.” And most disappointing of all, with those charges ringing in his ears, Moses turned to God and said, “Why did you send me when all that happens is the people get beaten and you don’t do anything to help?” Moses said that Pharaoh has done evil to the people, but did you read carefully? He also said that God did evil to the people.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 124.

Application: How Will You Handle Opposition and Discouragement While You Follow Jesus?

So I guess here is where we are going to get the bulk of our application. This is where we see ourselves in this story: Remember that at the end of chapter 4, when Moses and Aaron had told the Hebrews that God was coming to rescue them and that they would have their freedom soon, how did the people respond? They worshiped God, they were excited! This was very good news – someone had come to help them and their slavery would be coming to an end. But then the first step of the rescue plan didn't seem to work: not only did Pharaoh refuse to give them some time away, but he cracked down on them and made life unbearable for them. And had them whipped when they couldn't meet his impossible new standard.

So the question before us is: when you start obeying God and stepping out in faith and trying to do what's He's called you to do, there's usually an expectation that things are going to work out and get better. And that you'll find success and "blessing." So what do you do when none of that happens and things actually get worse, and people hurt you, and the devil works overtime to discourage you, and maybe even your Christian friends are upset with you. (And that's just on social media, in person can be even harder.) The Christian life is going to include opposition and disappointment. When we confront the culture with the Word of God, it's not often well-received. And the enemy opposes us. And our own people are hurt, angry, and scared.

And we see how this affects both leaders and people. Because when things turn sour, the people grumble and are upset, but you'd think Moses would stay calm and remind them: "Relax! Trust the plan, trust your God. This was to be expected, it's all going how God said it would, we knew Pharaoh wasn't going to be on board from the beginning. But it will all work out." But Moses doesn't say that because he doesn't feel that, he crumbles under the pressure too. Yes, pastors and spiritual leaders get discouraged and give in to despair and negativity as well. But before we get down on Moses too much, we have to see that he does what we all should do in those hard, discouraging moments: he brings his complaints and hurts to God. As David does in the Psalms, as we should do. Bring all of your burdens and hurts to the Lord.

"And out of the whole story there comes to us this lesson: we must never suppose that the difficulties which confront us indicate that we are not on God's path, and doing his work. Indeed the contrary is generally the case. If we are willing to walk with God, He will test the sincerity and temper of our soul."⁵ -F.B. Meyer

So chapter 5 ends with everything looking gloomy, everyone is despondent. But the first verse of chapter 6 will shoot hope back into the story: "*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."* Pharaoh had asked in the 2nd verse: "*Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?"* And really the Israelites and Moses are asking the same thing, "Who is the Lord? Is He strong enough to do what He said He would do? Is He strong enough to accomplish it?" And God says, "Yes. I am strong enough, sit back and watch as I show you how strong I am, and how I will accomplish this. You're about to see some crazy things! Pharaoh's not letting you go now, but I'm going to make life so miserable for him that he will drive you out of town." It didn't happen immediately, it didn't happen on everyone's timetable. God had reasons for doing this the hard way, the long way, to give Pharaoh every chance He could to relent and release the people. But God will show up and He will follow through. Pharaoh's time of judgment is coming, the people's deliverance is coming.

⁵ F.B. Meyer, *Moses: The Journey Of Faith* (Chattanooga: AMG, 2001), p. 47.

If there was anyone who followed the will of God perfectly and did not deserve any opposition or violence, it was God's Son that He sent to save the world. A man who never sinned, never hurt anyone, who healed, and spoke words of truth to give people life. And yet, before He finished His mission, Jesus faced unfathomable opposition. People were angry at every step of the way in His ministry. His own people plotted to kill Him from very early on, and eventually succeeded. They were afraid that, like Pharaoh, Rome would come down extra hard on them if Jesus got out of control. His death, the darkest day in human history, may have seemed that God was not acting, like Moses' complaint: "You have not delivered Your people at all." And yet God was in the middle of His greatest work: He would raise Jesus from the dead and use those actions as the instrument of deliverance and forgiveness of all His people. Satan, like Pharaoh, thought He had won. But God was in the middle of delivering His people, using Jesus' death on the cross as the way to atone for our sins, as the means to reconcile us with Him and bring us into His eternal family.

We fight discouragement with gospel promises. (*that's my thesis sentence for this sermon, btw*) We walk by faith, not by sight. When it doesn't look like God is walking with us and things are not going how we hoped, people have turned on us or life has beaten us down, we lift our eyes to the heavens and remember that He is "*able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.*" (Ephesians 3:20) Now, of course, being careful that we don't presume that everything we expect of God has to be exactly what God accomplishes, we know we can trust Him. Paul put it like this in 2 Corinthians 4:8-11, 16-18: "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh... So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 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.*"

When trouble comes in our lives, God is still in control. Whether we understand it or not, He is working out His glorious purposes.⁶ Whatever you are facing in your life, no matter how discouraging and difficult, your Heavenly Father loves you and is working all things eventually for your good and His glory.

Remember the opening story of Dr. William Lesli, the missionary to Vanga in the Congo? (If you know preacher's tricks, you know I had to come back to that; couldn't just let that story end in discouragement.) All of that happened in the 1920's and 30's. Fast forward to 2010, 70 some years later, when a team from Tom Cox World Ministries travelled by plane, canoe, and foot to meet the Yansi people. While they thought that the Yansi people might know who Jesus was, they were not prepared for what they found: a network of reproducing churches; a strong church in each of the 8 villages, each with their own gospel choir. There was still no Bible in their language, but tribesmen had learned French just to be able to read it. The gospel was alive and flourishing! Where William Leslie saw problems and failures, God saw faith and obedience, and worked greatly in the aftermath of Dr. Leslie's departure. God's strong arm saved His people. Amen.

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), pp. 167-168.