

## **My Firstborn**

Exodus 4:18-31

I remember when I first thought about the issues of God's sovereignty and man's salvation, about the idea of predestination. I was in college. I attending a church in which the pastor faithfully and consistently preached the Word of God. I didn't know it at the time, but it was expository preaching. He read the text. He explained what it meant. He applied it to our lives. It was very plain and clear. And it was very edifying. I was learning a lot and growing in my faith.

I remember a series of sermons he preached on the book of Exodus, and I remember one sermon in particular. But I remember that the sermon left me wondering what the Bible meant. That particular week, my pastor didn't explain the words of his text to my satisfaction. He seemed to avoid the words, and I didn't understand what they meant. "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

That phrase bothered me. That idea troubled me. Why did God do that? What does it mean in the first place? And what, then, does verse 21 of our text this morning mean?

v.21 "And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."

"I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." That just doesn't seem to make sense. It certainly didn't make sense to me all those years ago as I sat and listened. I thought Exodus was about the people of Israel leaving Egypt. I thought the Bible was about God's love and mercy to save his people. So

what could those words possibly mean, "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."

I came to understand those words within a couple years after that experience, and through all the years of my ministry, I have even more deeply and fully come to appreciate what they mean with respect to God's work of redemption. I want to begin some of that emphasis this afternoon. I will begin with an obvious statement,

### **I. GOD RESCUES HIS COVENANT PEOPLE.**

That is what is going on. This is a rescue mission. The people of Israel are in Egypt. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are slaves in a foreign land. And their lives are hard. Their work is harsh. In that context, God determines to rescue them. He has chosen Moses to lead them. Remember that calling,

Ex. 3:7 And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. 8 "So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. 9 "Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 "Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Just to set the stage by way of review, remember that before his call, Moses spent 40 years in Midian, having fled there after killing an Egyptian in defense of two of his fellow Hebrews. But now the time has come for Moses to return to Egypt, an act of

faith for which he is praised,

Heb. 11:24 "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, 26 esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. 27 By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible."

And so we read in our text today,  
v.18-19

God's purpose will be accomplished. He will remember his covenant. He will redeem his people out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And through Moses, we see,

#### **A. The power of God.**

v.20

Do you remember the rod? It was God's way of encouraging Moses.

Ex. 4:1 Then Moses answered and said, "But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" 2 So the LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A rod." 3 And He said, "Cast it on the ground." So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail" (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand), 5 "that they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

It is the rod of power. The symbol of power. The display of power. God's power. Moses will show forth God's power.

v.21a

But then we see what appears a non-sequitur. God says, "I will show Pharaoh my power,"

v.21 "...But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."

That doesn't seem to fit, does it? And so, the necessary question, what does that mean? Why does God say he will harden Pharaoh's heart? To be plain and clear, the text answers that question, doesn't it? And I won't skip over those verses and hope that you will be willing to skip over them with me, because they don't seem to be fit the common preconception of God or the theological conclusions of many people. Let me just proclaim to you as God has revealed them to us. God hardened Pharaoh's heart "so that he would not let the people go."

Still we are left with the question, "Why?" Well, what would this story look like if Pharaoh had let the people go himself? Why, the refrain would be, "Good for Pharaoh." Pharaoh would have been the hero of the story. Knowing the sinful inclinations of men in general and the Israelites in particular, the people would have honored and worshiped Pharaoh. He would have been their deliverer. So God hardened his heart, causing him to reveal the fullness of his own evil intentions, so that God would be able claim the role of deliverer.

God would be the one who would deliver his own people out of Egypt. And he would deliver them because he loved them. Just look at,

v.22

My firstborn. My first child. And, according to verse 23, "my son."

v.23

That was what I missed in that sermon of Exodus I heard in my college church. Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart and himself deliver his people Israel? Answer—so that God's power would be displayed by the way in which he rescued the people of Israel, because they were as beloved children to him.

Isn't that what this text says? It is not just that God delivered his people, but that he loved them. And it is not just that he loved them, but that he chose to love them. He chose them to be his son, his firstborn. He set his affection upon them, and them alone, because of his own sovereign will and purpose. In other, what is proclaimed to us in this account is,

### **B. The sovereign love of God.**

Isn't that how the apostle Paul interprets this declaration that God chose to harden Pharaoh's heart?

Rom. 9:15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 17 "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens."

Now, here's the real point. The climax of this whole idea of sovereign love.

Rom. 9:22 "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory."

Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? "That He might make

known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory." You see, not only is God's love a sovereign love, that he chooses to love the objects of his love. But he made that choice before the beginning of the world!

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved."

In love he predestined us. God's love is a sovereign love.

Let me emphasize this again and again, for your encouragement and edification. The root of the relationship between God and his people, the basis of that relationship, is nothing other than the fact that God lavishes his love upon us by calling us his children. "Israel is my firstborn." Israel is my beloved son. And that is true for you and me today, we who believe in Jesus and are united to him by faith.

But, there is more. Again, something of a non-sequitur. Something that doesn't seem to fit.

v.24-26

What that account? Why here? Simply this, I believe, that,

## **II. GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO COVENANT FAITHFULNESS.**

He loved them. He chose them. He predestined them. He predestined to chose to love them. And he calls upon the objects of his love to be faithful to him.

And this was the covenant relationship which he designed for his children,

Gen. 17:9 "And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised."

The sign of the covenant. But Moses had been unfaithful. Disobedient. And for God's covenant people,

### **A. Disobedience brings discipline.**

v.24

That verse is really surprising, isn't it? Why was the Lord going to take Moses' life? It must be his disobedience for failing to circumcise his son, presumably his younger son Eliezer. He also had an older son Gershom, and verse 20 simply mentions "sons" plural.

So God is prepared to discipline his servant Moses. I emphasize the word discipline, not condemn or judge. It would be an act of discipline, pretty severe discipline, to end his life. Similar occasion in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira. The point is well stated in,

Hebr. 12:5 "And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?...11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained

by it."

So be thankful that he disciplines you, instead of hardening you. And God's discipline of Moses, along with his discipline of us, reminds us of something very important. This sin of Moses' reminds us of something very important--each one of us needs cleansing. Spiritual cleansing.

### **B. The need for cleansing.**

Moses' sin was the failure to circumcise his son, probably because it was something that his Midianite wife Zipporah was unaccustomed to. And yet it was Zipporah who took care of the problem. But there is something more going on here--circumcision itself was a sign of cleansing. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant, the sign which identified God's covenant people. It represented the necessity of putting away all that is displeasing to God, symbol of dedication to God. Circumcision represents the work of God in our hearts.

So we read,

Deut. 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 "and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? 14 "Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. 15 "The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer."

Because of the sinfulness of our hearts, every one of us needs to be cleansed. Only one way to be cleansed--with blood. Thus Moses' wife Zipporah declares, "You are a husband of blood!" – because of the circumcision."

What Zipporah was saying is this, that her marriage continued only because of the blood of circumcision, otherwise her husband would have died. She purchased the life of her husband with the blood of her son. She was relieved and grateful.

This whole story reminds us of the central truth of the Bible. Spiritual cleansing is necessary. In the OT, the people of God had an elaborate sacrificial system. That whole system comes down to this simple idea: it is blood that atones for our sin.

Lev. 17:11 "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul."

And in the NT,

Hebr. 9:22 "And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission."

We certainly understand that it isn't the blood of goats and bulls that cleanses us; but rather it is the blood of Jesus Christ himself. Those bloody, outward sacrifices "cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience," since we read in Hebrews 9 that they are,

Heb. 9:10 "...concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

It is the blood of Christ that cleanses us and purifies us from all sin. As we often sing, "There is a fountain filled with blood,

drawn from Immanuel's veins; and sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains...The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there have I, as vile as he, washed all my sins away."

The story continues and reaches its intended conclusion. It is the intended conclusion for every text of Scripture you will ever read. It is the intended conclusion for my sermon, indeed for all my sermons. It is the call of God to his people to,

### **III. BELIEVE AND WORSHIP.**

At the risk of oversimplification, this is the application to be found on every page of Scripture. It is the application that ought to conclude every sermon. Believe, and worship.

v.31

Notice a couple of things about that, for direct and immediate application to our own situation as well.

#### **A. God's power enables his covenant children to believe.**

We are called to believe, but God does the enabling!

v.27-30

That is the background for,

v.31 "So the people believed..."

God showed his power to his people, so that they might believe! Isn't that the same thing that we studied at the end of John's gospel?

John 20:30 "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

And so I declare to you this afternoon, to believe. Believe God's word to be true. And believe God's power to be magnificent. God performs signs and wonders so that you will believe. God displays his power so that you will be able to believe in his power to raise Jesus from the dead, and by believing, to have eternal life.

And then, believing,

**B. God's love causes his covenant people to worship him.**

v.31b "...and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped."

When they heard that God had visited them, when they heard that God "looked on their affliction," when they heard that God loved them, "they bowed their heads and worshiped."

Again at the risk of over-simplification, there are really only two things you need to know about God. His power, and his love. There are a lot of subcategories of those two things, but let me keep it simple for your encouragement. This is what you need to know for a healthy, warm, vital relationship with God based upon a true knowledge and understanding of him, only two things really: that he is infinite in power and can do whatever he chooses to do according to his own sovereign will; and, second, that he is unchangeable in his love to those who are his people.

Ps. 62:11 "God has spoken once, Twice I have heard this: That power belongs to God. 12 Also to You, O Lord, belongs mercy."

So I call you to believe, to believe in the name of the God who delivers his covenant people out of their slavery to sin and

bondage. I call you to believe in the one who accomplishes that redemption, not Moses, but Jesus. In that context, I proclaim to you God's power to be your only source of hope and strength. And I proclaim to you God's love, the only sufficient motivation for you to worship him rightly.

People of God, this day, bow your head and worship him.

Ps. 95:6 "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. 7 For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand."