



The Success of Obedience

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Exodus 4:18-26

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¹⁸ Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." ¹⁹ And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." ²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

²⁴ At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

(Pastor Prays)

Success is an elusive thing. And how you actually measure your success can contribute to your spiritual, your emotional, and even your mental well-being. How do you know if you are a success? If you set a goal and work hard to meet that goal, and then you actually do meet the goal, do you qualify as a success? We celebrate successful people. As Baptists, we like to count things, money and people, and we call it success. If there's money, and people involved, like we look forward CLT Weekend, and we'll call it a success if there are a lot of kids there. This past Friday, four of us pastors went over to eastern North Carolina at Englewood Baptist Church in

Rocky Mountain, North Carolina, to a men's Bible conference. And before it even started, because there were 1100 men in the room, they were already calling it a success. How do you measure success? The measure of success comes in many forms.

But in the Bible, there is a prevailing measure of success. It is not money or riches. It is not a long life. It is not even contentment. It's not even having happy, healthy children. The measure of success is obedience. Obedience. That's the lesson we learn from this passage. It is admittedly a strange episode in the life of Moses, and it's a lesson that I hope you can take to heart today as you think about your own life and your own success. In Exodus 4:18, Moses has just concluded a little bit of an argument because Moses says to the Lord, who am I? And God says to him, it doesn't matter. You are a nobody. What matters is who I am. And then, Moses says, look, I got a thick tongue. I don't talk very well. I have some speech impediment, and the Lord says to Moses, who made man's mouth? I'm gonna be with your mouth. So after that, God gives him a couple of little party tricks, and with the staff in his hand, God sends him on his way. Now, in verse 18, Moses is determined to do what God has commanded him to do. And we turn that into a picture of success. So, let this be the theme.

Success Means Obedience to God's Commands

Are you being a success? You are if you are being obedient to God's commands. Now, this is an unusual story with a really strange verse at the end. Let's walk through it; I'll point out a couple of things and then maybe come back and make a few points. So, just follow along with your copy of the Bible. There in verse 18, the text says that Moses, after his encounter with God at the Burning Bush, went back to Jethro, his father-in-law. Moses had been in the desert for 40 years. Moses met this group of girls, and he married one of them. Now, he is minding Jethro, his father-in-law's flock. That's what he's done with his life up to this point. But here is a turning point. He's going to go down to Egypt again. He goes back to Jethro, his father-in-law, and he doesn't tell him everything. He just says, look, I want to go back to check on my brothers, and his father-in-law let them go. There are two lessons here that I'll point out. The first one is that it is always right to be respectful. You can never go wrong with being respectful. Moses has the weight of the world on his shoulders with this epic call from God, so he goes back to his father-in-law and says, I'm going to go do this. That's the respectful thing to do. The other side is that Jethro, who is the father-in-law, doesn't put undue pressure on Moses. He doesn't say,

you're going to leave and take my grandchildren? I can't believe this. Jethro just says, then go. So take a lesson from that all of you parents and grandparents. The Lord said to Moses in Midian, go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead. Here is God giving Moses assurance. Remember, Moses had killed a man back in Egypt, and Pharaoh was after him. That's why he left. And now he has some assurance from God that if he goes back there, everybody who knew about his past, they are gone.

When you read this, though, this ought to make you think of the New Testament because we're going to read about Mary and Joseph down in Egypt with Jesus. And Joseph will be told by an Angel that everybody that wanted to kill the baby, namely Herod, is dead. You can go back. Here is a reminder that this story is more than just a story of Moses. Here is a picture and a precursor pointing over to Jesus. Jesus, who will live in our place and die on the cross for our sins. God will raise him from the dead. This points us to Jesus, who gives us hope. Jesus, who gives us the gospel.

You find that already emerging in verses 19-20. Look at Moses's priorities. He took his wife. Zipporah and his two sons and had them ride on the donkey. So they are on mounts, and he is walking. And you'll notice that when they go back to Egypt, Moses took the staff of God in his hand. Here is Moses; now, with this call to obedience, he has the things in his life that are the most important to him. He has that staff in his hand that will show the presence and the authority and the power of God. So, you need to make sure your relationship to God is right. He's showing servant leadership to his wife and sons. Those are the things that are important to him, the Lord, and his relationship to his family.

Let's keep moving. Here is the mission. It takes a southward turn. Your mission is to go and show Pharaoh that God is going to save his people. Look how the mission is going to unfold in verse 21. *²¹And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.* It's going to be a failure. God will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

We do a lot of mission trips around here, and we don't ever, on the front end of the mission trip, think, you know this is going to be an abject failure. We don't say, go out there and

witness, and everybody's going to hate you. No, that's not what we think. We will hope to see people come to Christ. But Moses is told, go and do this, be obedient, and it's going to fail miserably.

Now, also in this passage, you have the statement that God has hardened Pharaoh's heart. When you read the whole story, what you're going to find is oftentimes, God hardened his heart. Sometimes, you have it said that Pharaoh hardened his heart. Other times it is said, his heart was hardened. So, there are three things that you should think through here. One is the sovereignty of God. This is the power of God to do what he wants. When Paul is writing in Romans chapter 9, he reaches over to this very moment and says God has the power to do that. Also, think about your responsibility. We are responsible for our actions and our decisions. There is a very real decision to be made. There is a right and a wrong, and Pharaoh chooses the wrong. Think about sovereignty and responsibility and then underneath of those, think about depravity. I don't think that Pharaoh came into this world, and he's completely even and neutral; he was not. He's like all of us, born into this world with a sinful nature. And God uses that, under his providence, to display his power. But that's not even the most interesting thing. Keep going to verse 22. The Lord is going to tell Moses to say. ²² *Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.* Israel is my firstborn son. God is saying, these are his chosen people; they're not just viewed as slaves. Moses is not going back to get the slaves. Here is God viewing his people as his own children.

And when you extend that a little further, for those of you who have put your faith in what Christ has done for you, you go from being a slave to sin to being a child of God. It's because of what Christ has done. Here is the precursor to that. Then, in verse 23, God says, ²³ *and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'*" Here's an eye for an eye. We're going to have some Old Testament law here. If you do not let my firstborn son go. I will kill your firstborn. Here is a foreshadowing of the 10th plague. It is also a foreshadowing of the Passover; the way God delivers his people is he sends a 10th plague, the Angel of Death, into the entire region. The only people that survive are those that have the blood of a lamb on the door posts of their home. The Angel of Death passes over, and that reminds us of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died on a cross, and because of his shed

blood, the wrath of God passes over us. There we have the grace of God, the beautiful picture reminder of the gospel.

But then it turns really odd in verses 24-26. In fact, Kyler was making fun of me. He said, you know, I've never been more thankful that I'm not preaching on Sunday. So let's go to it. ²⁴ *At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.* ²⁵ *Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"* ²⁶ *So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.* So at a camp, when he's going down to Egypt, it's a long trip, you have to stop and spend the night at a lodging place on the way. The Lord met him and sought to put him to death. God has the power to take any one of us out of this world at any moment, at any time, in an instant, but God doesn't do that here. But somehow, in verse 25, Zipporah, his wife, who doesn't even know the rules of Judaism. (By the way, Zipporah is the sixth woman to save Moses. First, it was the midwives, then you had Moses' mother and his sister. That makes four, and then you have the Pharaoh's daughter. So here's the sixth woman to help Moses.) And notice what she does. She took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin. This is circumcision. This is from Genesis. It's a sign of the covenant. Children, if you don't know what that is, ask your mom and dad. I didn't write this. I'm just reading it. Evidently, Moses had not followed through with the sign of the covenant with his sons. He was in sin, and God was going to pour out his wrath on him. Zipporah sees that happening; she knows the sign of the covenant, and here's what she does. ²⁵ *Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"* ²⁶ *So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.* Success means obedience to God's commands.

Let me go through it now and give you a few points. Here is the first one, number one.

Obedience is better when you're respectful

You lose nothing by being respectful. You find it right there in verse 18: Moses is going to be this colossal figure. When we look at the first five books of the Old Testament, Moses has a commission from God, and it is epic, and yet he shows respect to his father-in-law. One thing that stuck out to me, though, was that he didn't tell the whole truth. In verse 18, Moses went

back to Jethro and says, please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see if they are alive. I mean, Moses has just come from the desert, he just saw a bush burning that was not consumed, he met with the God of the universe, he was given a couple of tricks, his staff in his hand can turn into a snake. His hand becomes leprous, and then it's healed; he didn't tell Jethro any of that. So, while he is respectful, my thought was, he is embarrassed because it's not believable. Look, be respectful, but don't be embarrassed about what God has done in your life. Don't be embarrassed by your testimony, the transformative power of the gospel. What does Peter say in 1 Peter 3:15? ¹⁵ *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* There is so much about your attitude or the words that you say, the sentences that you use, the demeanor on your face. When we are obedient, there's something great about adding respect to that. Let's go a little further down. Here's the second thing, number two.

Obedience is easier when you are confident in God

You have it right there in verse 19. It is going to be much easier when he knows that there are no assassins down there in Egypt waiting on him. ¹⁹ *And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."* Moses already knows that Pharaoh is dead. God has told Moses, be confident; I'm going to be with you; I'm going to be with your mouth. Now, it would be nice, now and then, to have an audible voice of God speak to us to give us confidence. We don't have that, but we do have so many good things. Like you've got the Lord's day. This day has been given to us by God. It is set aside as a day of victory, where we celebrate Christ's victory over death at the resurrection. We, as his people, gather to worship him, and that worship is strengthening. It is part of your growth in the Lord. You also have discipleship, where you are growing as a believer, knowing more and more about what the word of God says to your heart. You have the theology that you are developing into. You have God using you on mission. When we worship together on a Sunday, we leave here with our hearts on the Gospel mission. Know what else you have, the gift of repentance. Repentance is a gift that when we fall off into sin, we look to what Christ has done for us, and we claim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our sins are forgiven at the cross. You have your own testimony about how God saved you, how he sought you, how he has sustained you.

You have the ability to articulate the gospel. We've given you the categories. The holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the coming of Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, and the necessity for faith in that. That is going to give you confidence. When you become more obedient, you become more aware that you actually are a child of God. One of the things that I noticed here in verse 19 is obedience is much easier when you're confident in God. Let me give you a third thing to consider, number three.

Obedience helps clarify your priorities

In verse 20, Moses took his wife and his sons, had them ride on a donkey, and he went back to the land of Egypt. Moses took the staff of God in his hand. So what does he have? He's got his wife, Zipporah, and his two sons going with him. Not only that, he has them mounted, and he is walking. He has the staff of God in his hand, so he has his relationship and awareness of God, and he has the people that he loves the most with him. What does that mean? So, the staff of God is going to come into play down the road. Here's what we know. It will symbolize God's power to save. Not only that, it will symbolize God's authority to deliver. And not only that, that staff will symbolize God's presence to comfort and to strengthen priorities, it's good for you to have those in line for your life when you are seeking to obey God. Are those your priorities? Have you made it your top priority to know God, to understand who he is, to be in right relationship to him? And has that top priority affected how you love other people and how you love your family? And Paul calls the body of Christ the church family. Make that your top priority. Obedience has a way of clarifying our priorities. Let me give you another point, number four.

Obedience is success

We need to reorient how we view success. Obedience is the success. Let me show it to you.

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. So do all those things, use them with the elders. That is success. Don't gauge success on the results because God is going to harden Pharaoh's heart. He will not let the people go. I've called you to do something, and it's going to be a hard thing. God sends Moses on a mission

trip, and that mission trip is not going to turn out well. We have to make sure that we see obedience as success.

Now, I love good results. I love to have great numbers and great events. But let's make sure that the results are not the ultimate goal. Obedience is the ultimate goal. When God calls Isaiah, remember what he says to him. Who would go for us? Isaiah says, here I am. But if you keep reading, God tells him, look, you're going to go and preach, and people will hear, but they're not going to understand. People will see, but they won't perceive. The results are going to be terrible. You see, results are great, but obedience is better. Results are great when you witness to someone; your desire is to see that person come to Christ, but that's not your job. God will save, your job is obedience. When you go on a mission trip, you won't see hundreds come to Christ. That is not your job. Your job is obedience. Look, there is a shortage of men going into ministry, especially in Baptist churches. In our country here, there are so many churches that don't have pastors. And I think how great it would be that, from this congregation, God would call men to ministry. The results are not what we're looking for; it's the obedience.

Or in your marriage, it may not be a perfect marriage, but obedience is success, or even in your singleness. You know, I have thought about this. So many, even in this room, have loved with a faithful, sacrificial loving, your children. You brought up your child in a Christian home. You were obedient, and the results are terrible. Be careful that you're not so focused on the result that you miss the joy of actually being obedient. Take some comfort in knowing that the weight of this conversation right here, that God has with Moses, the weight of it is not on the result because the result is going to be bad. The weight of it is you doing what God has called you to do. Obedience is success. Look, you don't have to feel like a success to be one. But you do have to be obedient. Let's go further in, number five.

Obedience is born in love

It's the love of God. God calls his people his firstborn son, his favored child, his chosen race. The people of God are not just slaves. He's going to go get them. These are his children. Look, here is the heart of the Gospel. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life. That is what compels us to obey; it

is the love of God. So, the first several points had the word obedience in them. I want to close with two points that don't have the word obedience in them. Both points come from this last strange passage. Here's number six.

Be thankful for God's patience

God is patient. At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and sought to put him to death. You understand that the wages of sin is death. We find out in verses 25-26, Moses has not kept the covenant made in Genesis 17. He is a sinner, and the wages of his sin is death. And God had every right to take Moses out. And yet the text says he didn't do it. Remember the story of Jonah. Jonah is called to go preach, but he runs from God, and nobody runs away from God. God gets him through a series of events, and he ends up in Nineveh. What does he do when he walks through Nineveh? He preaches. Nineveh will fall, but you've got some time. For any of you who went through some wild rebellion in life and God let you live long enough to become a Christian, you ought to be thankful for the patience of God. Thankful that he spared you long enough for your eyes to open and see. For some of you right now, if you are in rebellion, you're running from God, and the only reason that God has not killed you right now is his patience so that you can hear the gospel and trust and believe that he loves you. And that brings me to the last point.

Have a clear grasp on the Gospel

I am convinced that verses 25 and 26 point clearly to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let me read it and talk about it. ²⁵ *Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"* ²⁶ *So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.* The wrath of God is turned. So just think with me a minute. Every one of us is like Moses. We have broken the covenant. We are under divine wrath. Moses had not circumcised his sons. He had not kept the covenant. We are like Moses in that we have failed to keep God's law, and because of that, we are subject to God's curse. And the only way that we can be saved from eternal death is for God's wrath to somehow be turned aside. And it can only happen through an act of bloodshed. Hebrews 9:22 says that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. ²⁵ *Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet.* It's a

bloody act. That word, touch, is the same word that will be used in Exodus 12 at the Passover. When the blood of the Passover lamb touches the doorpost, the Angel of death, the wrath of God, is turned away. And today, there is a straight line from here in Exodus 12 all the way to the gospel in the New Testament. Paul says it like this in Colossians 1:19-20 says, ¹⁹*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* ²⁰*and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.* This passage points us to the cross of Jesus and the hope and forgiveness found in Christ. We've been talking a lot about obedience, looking at Moses and his obedience. But the first step of obedience begins at the cross. It is to confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and to believe in your heart, that God raised him from the dead. He took the wrath for us. And if you will do that, the Bible teaches you will be saved. Obedience is success, and success is obedience, and it begins at the cross of Jesus.

(Pastor prays)