

Exodus 4:18-5:21 Costly Obedience

Introduction

Moses and Zipporah had a good steady family life with their children Gershom and Eliezer. The weekly routine had been pretty similar for years and could be until they entered old age, by which time their children would have grown up and taken on their own responsibilities as adults. They had a roof over their heads, food on the table and their basic needs were met. There was nothing fancy or luxurious about their way of life in comparison with that with which Moses had been accustomed in the palace in his youth, yet they were content with their lot. There was not the slightest doubt until his encounter with God at the burning bush that Moses would have been happy to settle down there in obscurity for the rest of his days. The young man looking for action was now in midlife with plenty to lose and less to gain by taking risks with his life. It is not difficult to identify with the thought patterns of Moses and Zipporah at this time. Over the centuries cultural expectations may change, but the same patterns of thinking are found in each generation. It is the younger people who may be looking for excitement and adventures before they have responsibilities for careers or family members - whether young children or older parents; or mortgages or rents to pay; as the decades pass by our commitments increase and moving home or making major life changes becomes a much bigger prospect. However, the scenario before us is not of a younger couple with young children, but an older man with possibly a younger wife and children who are now young adults in their own right. There is a lot about this story that we do not know. What is clear is that Moses and Zipporah had some difficult conversations about the way ahead. The details will never be known but I suspect she was not keen on the prospects of moving to another country and all the risks that were involved. How much did Moses attempt to share with her about the ups and downs of life that might lie ahead of them? We will never know the answer to this question. I think it most likely that weeks or even months passed before this couple were both in agreement as to what happens next. I also have become convinced that Zipporah was agreeable to visiting Moses' family, but not committed to a permanent relocation to Egypt. What is important to grasp is that obeying the call of God and living in His will for their lives did not make things easier for this family. Life would get much tougher and more challenging.

This is important for us to reflect on today. There are skeptics who claim that Christianity is like a crutch. It is for people who need a little help to get through life with all its challenges. The inference is that they are stronger individuals who are self reliant and don't need outside support! Living life as God intends it can be more challenging as a believer as we at different times in our lives have to take faith steps in the choices we make that might otherwise without a prompt from God be avoided. It is more costly not less in terms of our time and finances and abilities. However, the skeptics have failed to grasp that a person who is living God's way will gain greater fulfillment from living for God and will accomplish far more in life by living this way than they would otherwise have done and other people will benefit more through the application of our faith in daily life. But although living for God can at times be exciting and encouraging, it can also be extremely difficult and require costly obedience to live the way God calls us to follow Him. However, He repeatedly assures us that He will provide the resources we need to accomplish what He has asked us to do. Jesus at the Last Supper reminded His followers of this fact in John 16:33: *'I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'***

1. The requirement of faith (Exodus 4:18-23)

(a) The wisdom of Moses (Exodus 4:18-19)⁸ *Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, 'Let me return to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive.' Jethro said, 'Go, and I wish you well.'* ¹⁹ *Now the Lord had said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.'* God had met with Moses and given him a fresh calling to lead the nation of Israel out of Egypt. He had reassured him that the Pharaoh and his officials who had the warrant for his arrest and prosecution for the murder of the Egyptian official were all dead and their successors would not resurrect the charge. It was, therefore, safe for him to return to Egypt. However, we notice how wise Moses was in seeking the permission of Jethro his father-in-law to honour this call. He had been taken in by Jethro and almost certainly had some kind of agreement to live and work for him, but now four decades later asks to be released from his duties to return to Egypt. Notice that Moses does not speak about the work God had asked him to do at this stage, it is simply a request for time to visit his family. There are many situations in life where we must speak the truth to people, but be wise in how much detail we pass on. A good example comes from Saul shortly after Samuel had indicated he would become the first king of Israel. Kish his father had sent Saul and a servant to look for some missing donkeys which they didn't find. However, on their way home they met an uncle of Saul who asked about their time away from home in I Samuel 10:14-16. In verse 16 we note the wise words of Saul: *Saul replied, 'He assured us that the donkeys had been found.'* *But he did not tell his uncle what Samuel had said about the kingship.* We must be truthful and not tell lies as a matter of principle. However, wisdom is always required in how we speak. A sensible parent will never give all the information they know behind advice to younger children; nor a doctor pass on all their information about a medical condition to a patient, for example. Jethro appreciated the respect shown by Moses and gave his consent for the trip to Egypt.

Zipporah and their adult sons will return to Midian to wait for Moses to bring the nation out of Egypt. They did not stay with him. It appears that Moses may have felt that it was safer for them to stay out of harm's way because circumstances for the Israelites would get much worse before they eventually got permission to leave Egypt. Exodus 18:2-6 gives a later summary of what took place: *After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her³ and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, 'I have become a foreigner in a foreign land';⁴ and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, 'My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'*⁵ *Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God.*

(b) The warning from God (Exodus 4:20-23)²⁰ *So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. And he took the staff of God in his hand.* ²¹ *The Lord said to Moses, 'When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.'* ²² *Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son,"²³ and I told you, 'Let My son go, so that he may worship Me.'* *But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son."* Here in a few words we see a family with all their worldly goods packed and ready to go on this journey. There would have been for all concerned very mixed emotions. For Zipporah and the young men it was a first trip away from their desert homeland so it was exciting; but would Moses' family welcome them? How would they fit in a very different culture where another first language they did not speak was spoken? For Moses it was probably a daunting prospect. How could he with the tools of a shepherd convince the leader of the regional superpower to release his best economic asset,

the enslaved Israelites in Goshen? The scale of the task was reinforced by God's words in Exodus 4:21: *But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.* This happened after the sixth plague, the plague of boils, recorded in Exodus 9:12: *But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses.* However, Pharaoh had no intention of heeding Moses' requests right from the first meeting. Exodus 7:13-14 states: *Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go.* This is a repeated pattern. In Exodus 8:15, after deliverance from the effects of another plague, the response from Pharaoh follows the same pattern. *But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.* So what does it mean that God would harden Pharaoh's heart from some months to a year or two later? It simply means God stopped speaking to his conscience and allowed him to continue on the pathway that led to judgement on the people of Egypt for refusing to release the enslaved people of Israel, in particular the consequences of the last plague the death of the first-born sons. No longer at that point did Pharaoh have a guilty conscience for the crimes he was perpetrating he became comfortable with it. God gives opportunities for people to come to faith; opportunities to repent of acts of actual sin, but if we fail to take them God allows us to face the logical consequences of our choices. Are you here today having heard the gospel many times but not yet put your faith in Jesus? Don't delay in putting your trust in Him you may not get any or many more opportunities? Is there a situation in which God has asked you to take action? Please heed His call it is for a good reason for your longer-term benefit that we respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit! Exodus 4:21-23 is a summary statement covering the events of the next few years in which God gives Moses a glimpse of the difficult future that lies ahead of him on the road to liberation of Israel from Egypt.

2. The recognition of obedience to God (Exodus 4:24-28)

The last few verses of Exodus chapter four are amongst the most difficult to interpret in the Old Testament. It is clear that there is much helpful background information that Moses and his first readers would have known and assumed here. However, it is possible that part of our difficulty lies in some of the translations of the text here. The main theological points here are not in doubt though as there is a two-fold emphasis being brought to Moses' attention by the Lord. There was a problem that needed to be resolved before he could commence his ministry as the leader of the nation of Israel. First of all:

(a) The problem of sin (Exodus 4:24-26)²⁴ *At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him.²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,' she said.²⁶ So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said 'bridegroom of blood', referring to circumcision.)* The literal translation of the Hebrew of verse 24 is this: *...Yahweh met him and He sought to kill him.* The person in question was not Moses but his first-born son Gershom. Why was this such a big issue? The answer is provided in Genesis 17:9-14 at the time when God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham for his descendants that would form the nation of Israel. What did God declare as the basis for the covenant: *Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.¹⁰ This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.¹² For the generations*

to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring.¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴**Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant**'. Moses, for your first-born son to be counted as an Israelite he must be circumcised. You have not honoured Me by keeping your obligation under that Old Testament covenant. By going back to Egypt without fulfilling this obligation you are putting your first-born son in mortal danger. Remember what would be the final plague in Egypt? It was the death of the first-born sons of the families of uncircumcised boys as Exodus 11:5 explains: *Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.* Each of the plagues was God challenging and demonstrating the impotency of different Egyptian gods that supposedly protested people from suffering that plague. The Pharaoh was viewed as a deity who had the power to protect first-born sons. This plague would be a total humiliation for Pharaoh and would be the key to the reluctant agreement to free the enslaved Israelites. The Egyptians following their Pharaoh had killed many a baby boy of enslaved families. The final punishment of judgement for their sin was a specific response to their heinous crimes. Why were the firstborn sons of the Israelites not in danger at that time? Exodus 12 explains that the blood of the lamb killed for the Passover meal that evening was to be put on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the covenant-keeping families in Israel. Exodus 12:12-13: *'On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.'*¹³ **The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.**

Moses had failed to circumcise his eldest son for reasons unknown. It was the husband's responsibility under Hebrew law to carry out this religious ritual. Yet here it was his wife Zipporah who carried out this action. She on behalf of the family was accepting the covenant obligations that her husband had neglected. Her mysterious words to Moses here are not as difficult to interpret once we grasp what was going on here. *'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,' she said* (Exodus 4:25). As a result of marrying an Israelite she was adopting his identity with his 'blood' obligation in terms of the ceremony of circumcision for male children. Although another translation is equally possible here: The word translated 'bridegroom' in the NIV is translated elsewhere as 'son-in-law', 'father-in-law' or even 'mother-in-law'. The basic idea of the word emphasizes that the person in question (Gershon) has become a blood relative through a covenant relationship. The circumcision of Moses' eldest son is a symbolic action denoting his entry into the covenant community of Israel (John D. Currid, *Exodus*, Vol.1, p. 116). What is the principle here for us today? The blessings God has for us may be forfeited if we willfully disobey the revealed will of God for our lives. In Isaiah 59:2 Isaiah proclaimed this hard-hitting truth to his nation: *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.* If we knowingly have a sin problem whether it be in our thoughts, words or actions God expects us to deal with it before His future blessings will be given to us. It is one issue to check in our lives if we are not getting any response from the Lord to our prayers. Or if we are seeking guidance and nothing appears to come up. Now there may or may not be an issue, but it is worth asking the Lord- is there an issue I need to sort out? Is there a relationship problem I need to resolve? If nothing comes to mind after we have openly asked the Lord for guidance on that specific issue, then we are in the clear on that one! Here it was a personal sin that was

risking future blessings. In Joshua 7 the sin of Achan (theft from Jericho) prevented the whole nation from receiving its blessings. The community of God's people missed out because of sin in its midst and the disaster at Ai was directly linked to it. In Psalm 24:3-4a we have this reminder: *Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? ⁴The one who has clean hands and a pure heart...* in other words a believer who has dealt with their known sins and come with a clear conscience before the Lord. This reminds us that we belong to communities of faith and are accountable to one another as well as to the Lord. The New Testament knows nothing of isolated Christians on their own; instead it is covenanted communities of people dedicated to living for God together in a particular local context.

(b) **The blessing of obedience** (Exodus 4:27-28)²⁷ *The Lord said to Aaron, 'Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.' So he met Moses at the mountain of God and kissed him.*²⁸ *Then Moses told Aaron everything the Lord had sent him to say, and also about all the signs He had commanded him to perform.* Now that the sin issue was resolved God started to progress the first step of Moses' mission by bringing his brother Aaron to meet with him and stand with him side by side for the majority of the next forty years. Rarely do believers have to stand literally on their own for God. Moses had to attend to his own heart and family first then God began to work in the lives of other people as well. When we take steps of faith for the Lord do not be surprised if God then opens a door of opportunity for us. For someone who honours the Lord with a difficult decision at work, the blessing might be work-related; for someone who honours the Lord in a family matter, the blessing might be family related. Or if it is a church decision then the church collectively might receive a blessing. May we individually and collectively not miss out on the blessings God has for us due to failure to honour Him in some area of our lives.

3. **The responsibility of witness for God** (Exodus 4:29-5:21)

(a) **The ordinary people** (Exodus 4:29-31)²⁹ *Moses and Aaron brought together all the elders of the Israelites,*³⁰ *and Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people,*³¹ *and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped.* The calling was not just for this family but for the nation and so Moses and Aaron brought the national leaders together to explain what God had planned for them. Did they give the bad news that things would get worse before they got better as well as the good news of future deliverance? We don't know, but the people of God collectively affirmed what God was saying to them and worshipped together before Moses said a word to Pharaoh. In the Lord's work in this church we have to be united in going forward in His service or our plans will not be successful. The people of God need to hear and acknowledge that God is directing them to go forward with a particular project. At this moment in time all seemed to be going so well for Moses, but it was the calm before the storm. He had never been more obedient to God yet the Lord allowed His servants to be seriously tested through the trials that would follow over the next few months or next few years. God never promises His people a problem free life. What He does promise is to stand with us through the storms and to bring us out on the other side.

(b) **All-powerful Pharaoh** (Exodus 5:1-18) *Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness."'*² *Pharaoh said, '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.'*³ *Then they said, 'The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may*

strike us with plagues or with the sword.’⁴ But the king of Egypt said, ‘Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labour? Get back to your work!’⁵ Then Pharaoh said, ‘Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.’⁶ That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people:⁷ ‘You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw.’⁸ But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don’t reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, “Let us go and sacrifice to our God.”⁹ Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.’¹⁰ Then the slave drivers and the overseers went out and said to the people, ‘This is what Pharaoh says: “I will not give you any more straw. ¹¹Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.”’¹² So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw.¹³ The slave drivers kept pressing them, saying, ‘Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw.’¹⁴ And Pharaoh’s slave drivers beat the Israelite overseers they had appointed, demanding, ‘Why haven’t you met your quota of bricks yesterday or today, as before?’¹⁵ Then the Israelite overseers went and appealed to Pharaoh: ‘Why have you treated your servants this way?’¹⁶ Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, “Make bricks!” Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people.’¹⁷ Pharaoh said, ‘Lazy, that’s what you are – lazy! That is why you keep saying, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.”’¹⁸ Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks.’ It was quite possible that the dictator of Egypt might refuse their request and impose some kind of severe punishment to ensure there was no repeat request from Moses and Aaron. However, looking more closely to what God asked Moses to do in Exodus 3:18 we see he was asked to take all the national leaders with him –not just Aaron- and ask for a three day religious holiday to spend time in worship and prayer. What we need to realize under Egyptian law was that slaves could request a limited amount of time off. Records from that era gives examples of workers given time off ‘to go to offer to their god’; the time permitted ranged from a day to four days, or in time of another Pharaoh between eight days and two weeks (K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament*, p. 157). A polite request asking for something granted to others in Egypt might have had a morale-boosting positive response, but the opportunity was lost. Instead Moses demanded what must have come across to Pharaoh as immediate emancipation from slavery which would have been impossible for him to grant without a total loss of face. Would a more gracious approach have prevented the draconian punishment that followed? We will never know, but his confrontational approach was certain to fail. When we have a difference of opinion with a brother or sister that needs a resolution then a gracious humble approach is always a right way to go about communicating our concerns. Moses still had a metaphorical ‘L plate’ on his back in terms of his calling. If only he had spoken more carefully! Most of us will have thought the same of our own words on occasions as well. May God help us to be wise and gracious in our speech with other people.

(c) **The Israelite leaders** (Exodus 5:19-21) ¹⁹The Israelite overseers realised they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.’²⁰ When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them,²¹ and they said, ‘May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’ How easily we lose our confidence and trust in other people and sadly sometimes in the Lord. In our trials may we trust the Lord to bring us through in His strength. May we also remember God’s promise to us in Hebrews 13:5b-6: ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’⁶ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’ May we stand firm even when we experience costly obedience, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

