

is difficult for us to pass judgement on this, however, because although the Israelites did indeed take a great deal of Egyptian goods with them (Exodus 12), what happened was in reality far more complex, and indeed, disturbing. When we study the events of the Exodus, we will look at the vexed question of why God punished the Egyptians and allowed them to suffer as they did when the Israelites finally left. In this passage, the message given to Moses merely says that the Egyptians will be 'favourably disposed' towards the Israelites and therefore give them 'silver and gold' items (3:22). We have to remember that the Israelites had come to Egypt with their own wealth, and were an independent community. They had been driven to poverty by the relentless slave labour forced on them in Egypt. It was important for God's people not to go away 'empty-handed' because they would not have been able to sustain themselves in the following years.

Application

This speech of God to Moses does not appear to have a great deal to offer us, apart from being a prophecy of what would happen in the following chapters of Exodus. It does, however, contain the one major feature which I have already drawn attention to, which is the partnership it envisages between Moses (and the elders) and God. This is one of many texts in the Bible which help us to understand that God wants to work with His people, and this is already becoming a major theological theme of Exodus. What we must realise today is that God does not do His work of salvation solely through His people; He works as He will, inside or outside the church but always with the same saving purposes in mind.

We are reminded by this text that when God gives instructions about what He wants His people to do, then they are called, like Moses, to listen to Him and do what he says. If we respond, then God is able to work with us and do the 'signs and wonders' and the miraculous deeds which are often His way of making an impact in situations which are too difficult or complex for us to engage with or fathom. Perhaps we do not see too many great and wonderful works of God because we have not been as obedient to Him as we ought? This may or may not be true, but if we dwell on such thoughts for too long, then we take our eyes away from our task. Just as the future of the people of Israel depended on the obedience of Moses and the elders in their partnership with God, so the future of the Church today lies in the hands of those who will be obedient in partnership with their Lord.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the possible reactions of the elders of Israel to this message?
2. What has happened in your own life which is like a partnership between you and God? Share any experiences.
3. How do miraculous deeds help the work of the Gospel? Why do people find difficulty in believing in 'miracles' when they are an important part of Scripture?

Discipleship

Partnership with God depends upon communication. This whole text, studied today, is a speech of God which had to be heard and communicated. Moses had to be someone who heard God and spoke out what he had heard. This is why later generations of Israelites called him a prophet, though Scripture rarely does. Each of us bears the responsibility of being someone God can use, and we must be able to recognise His voice. This text also tells us that if we work with Him, we will see the wonderful works He does! Look for this!

Final Prayer

While I sleep, O Lord, let my heart not cease to worship You; let my sleep be permeated by Your presence, while creation keeps watch, singing psalms with the angels, and taking my soul into the heart of its glorious praise! AMEN

(Gregory of Nazianzus, c.330-89)

Prayer

Stop the driving pressures of my day, O Lord, and nurture me. Lead my spirit to dream its dreams, to see great visions of grace, to cast aside all consuming aggressions within my soul and take my rest in You. And in those precious moments, gracious Lord, restore me. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church community

Reflect upon the different communities represented within your own church. Pray for each of them briefly, asking the Lord to strengthen them and help each of them see how they make up an essential part of what your church is. Pray also for greater fellowship amongst people, and pray to bless the whole church and its work, wherever you may be.

Meditation

Do you feel uneasy in your soul, has peace slipped from your grasp?
Maybe the Lord is saying something to you; so set yourself to listen:

Is He asking you to stop and think?

Is He calling you to face what you dislike?

Is He reminding you to turn to Him for help?

Is He challenging you to grasp the unknown?

Is He telling you to offer someone free forgiveness?

Is He doing a work in you which is not yet clear?

Is He offering you help, which you have not yet accepted?

Is He saying, 'I am here, but please don't turn away ...'

It may be hard to face the reasons for your feelings,

But the Lord is present when you need Him; and He will lead you on.

Bible Study - Exodus 3:16-22

¹⁶ 'Go and gather together the elders of Israel and tell them, " The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, has appeared to me and said; 'I have been paying close attention to you and what has been done to you in Egypt. ¹⁷ I declare to you that I will lead you out of your affliction and into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, The Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.' ¹⁸ They will hear what you have to say; then you and the elders of Israel will go to the king of Egypt and say to him; 'the LORD, the God of the Hebrews has met with us. We ask you to let us take a three day journey into the desert so that we may offer sacrifices to the LORD our God.'

¹⁹ However, I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go, except by means of a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all of my miraculous deeds which I will do in their midst. After that, he will let you go. ²¹ I will make the Egyptians so favourably disposed towards the people that when you go, you will not go empty handed. ²² Each woman will ask her neighbour and others living in her house for silver and gold items, and clothing to put on your sons and daughters; and in this way, you will plunder the Egyptians.'

Review

After the great revelation of God's name in the previous verses, the Lord spoke to Moses, giving him clear instructions about what he should do in order to bring about the freedom of the

people of Israel. Some of this passage is similar to what God previously said (3:8-10), but here, we have a complete plan of action which sets out what lies ahead. God never reveals Himself without some purpose in mind, and the revelation of His name (3:15) has been given to accompany a great and powerful deed, the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt, called the 'Exodus'. In this passage, God outlines a mixture of work to be done by Moses (e.g. see 3:16), and work He will do by His own power (e.g. 3:19,20), and this is typical of the way that God works with His people. He delights to work in partnership with those who will do His will, balancing work He commissions from His people and work that is His alone, which He does by sovereign power.

Moses was therefore given instructions about gathering the 'elders' of Israel to tell them the name of God that had just been revealed to him (3:16), and that He was the same God as the God of their fathers. Then came words of reassurance for the people, telling them that the Lord had been closely watching what was happening to them in Egypt (3:16). After this, Moses was to tell them about God's plans for their deliverance out of Egypt (3:17) into the Promised Land, occupied at that time by a number of different tribal groups (for a discussion of the meaning of a 'land flowing with milk and honey', see notes on Exodus 3:8). Having heard this, the elders and Moses were to go to Pharaoh. This would be no easy task, for any communication with the king of Egypt was fraught with difficulties, as is known from ancient Egyptian records. This was where Moses' past court experience would be required.

The message to be given to Pharaoh was not one that he would want to hear. A previous Pharaoh (1:8) had feared that minority tribal groups like the Hebrews would try to escape and join with other enemies of Egypt in the desert regions beyond the Sinai, bringing war and instability to Egypt. He therefore thought it imperative to keep minority groups oppressed so that they would not create trouble. The people of Israel would have to fight against this deep-seated fear in Pharaoh, and they would need God's help in this, or as the passage says, God's 'mighty hand' (3:19,20). At the point where human resources were not sufficient, God would act to 'strike the Egyptians' (3:20), triggering the release of the people (3:21,22).

Just as God shared the work of this deliverance between Himself and His servant Moses (and the elders), there would be glory both for God and for His people. God would do great deeds, or 'miracles' (3:20) which would bring Him glory, and the people would find themselves able to gain wealth from the Egyptians as they left and therefore add to their own 'glory' in an earthly sense (the word 'glory' also means 'wealth' and 'honour').

Although this whole passage is a speech by God about what was going to happen, it is remarkable that He outlined a partnership with His people through which the great Exodus would be achieved. It was a partnership which would be strained almost to breaking point in years to come, but it was a partnership that did deliver the promised liberation.

Going Deeper

Although this passage reads relatively easily for us today, it is really an example of what is best described as complex oriental bargaining. As we look at the details, Moses has to ask for the people to be allowed to go for three days (3:18), but there is no intention of this. The people are trying to obtain permission to leave completely! There again, why should they ask for permission, why not just go? A closer look will help us understand these things.

Gathering the elders, and telling them what they have to do

Moses needed specific instructions about what to do, and God gave them. He told Moses to return to Egypt and confront the elders of the people, which was hardly an easy thing for him to do. He had left Egypt in disgrace after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, something that would have probably drawn reprisals from the Egyptians on the Israelite community. It would be difficult for Moses even to gather the elders! The term 'elders' is interesting, as this is the first time that it is used in the Bible to describe leaders of the people of Israel. The term normally refers to people who have a religious duty of leadership amongst people, and its use here indicates that the people of Israel, even though they were oppressed, retained both a distinct identity and religious beliefs. In hindsight, we take this for granted, but this is the first clear

evidence in the text this was so, apart from the general description of them as the 'people of Israel', or 'Hebrews'. If the people were going to be marshalled together to leave the country and head for the Promised Land, then leaders were important!

At the close of verse 16 there is an interesting phrase; 'I have been paying close attention to you' (3:16). Most Bibles have something like this; 'I have watched over you ...' but the words in Hebrew are emphatic, and suggest that God was scrutinising what was happening. God's watchfulness was not merely general, but special and particular. He knew exactly what he wanted to do to save His people from their troubles; but they would need to follow His plan, which is given in verse 17, and almost identically to what God said to Moses previously (3:8).

One of the most interesting parts of this passage is verse 18, in which Moses was instructed to take the elders with him to see Pharaoh and announce to the king of Egypt what they wanted to do. We already know that God's plan was to take the people of Israel out of Egypt permanently, so it comes as a surprise to us that Moses was told to ask permission for a 'three day journey' to offer sacrifices. It looks to us as if God was asking Moses to deceive Pharaoh in order to enable the people to escape from Egypt as peacefully as possible! Some commentators feel that such deception was morally reprehensible, but that is rather wide of the mark, because none of us can really understand the reality of the awful situation in which the people found themselves, and we should not moralise on what was appropriate to liberate them. In addition, who are we to tell God what is moral and what is not, however odd it may appear to us!

What we must bear in mind as we read this verse is that oriental bargaining is not something with which most of us are familiar today. There is plenty of evidence that when bargaining for important matters, people of those days would 'understate' their requirements, on the understanding that a favourable response to a request would concede more than what was asked. It sounds odd, but in English, we might sometimes say 'wait a minute', meaning 'please wait as long as I need to finish this ...' for example; and in this way, we use understatement without thinking, and so did ancient people when bargaining. For this reason, we should not spend long trying to work out what God meant by telling Moses to ask for three days in the desert. This was an opening bargaining gambit, which Pharaoh would have understood as asking for far more. Certainly, later on the story, it is clear that he understood this to be the case, and the Israelites' request to go and worship was for far more (see, for example, 9:27-35).

What will happen when God gets involved!

Speaking prophetically, God told Moses and the elders of Israel what would happen when they confronted the king of Egypt. Now, Pharaoh was regarded as a god, and as such he would normally only speak with those who could also claim some divine status (as we know from ancient documents and inscriptions), normally people of his own family. One other category of people was able to speak to Pharaoh, and these were the 'magicians, whose ability to do 'signs and wonders' gave them an aura of the divine. This was to be the way that God would make Pharaoh listen to Moses and the elders, for God promised that whilst Moses did what he was asked (together with the elders) then He, the Lord God, would do the signs and wonders! This is first hinted at in verse 19, which ends with an unclear phrase in Hebrew, which uses the words 'mighty hand', an expression which is commonly used by Scripture to refer to the power and authority of God. In summary, the verse tells us that Pharaoh would not let the people of Israel go without God acting through great 'miraculous deeds' (3:20) to make him do this, and verse 20 adds that God was fully intent on this course of action!

The stage for the forthcoming chapter of Exodus is set by this speech, as it captures in miniature the great struggle that was about to evolve between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses was not too happy with what God told him, however, and struggled with God over it for some time, as we will discover in the next few chapters! We can begin to see, however, how the partnership between God and his servant Moses was being mapped out.

Many people find the last part of this passage difficult, because of the way that God favours His people, telling them that they will take advantage of the Egyptians by plundering them(3:21). It