

genuinely concerned for the people and their inability to understand what was happening to them. His words; 'why did you send me on such a mission ...' (5:22) were not a complaint about his call so much as a response to the fact that he had just been confronted by the evidence of deep unhappiness and unbelief amongst the people. He was right to be worried.

Moses did complain about Pharaoh and his treatment of the people (5:23), and challenged the Lord about what had happened. Up until then, God had not done anything which would indicate to the people that He was active in their interests at all. The Lord responded to this point by saying in His reply; 'You will now see what I will do to Pharaoh ...' (6:1) and repeated His promise that the time had come for some action.

Application

At the beginning of this study, we identified three ways of reading this story; as spiritual warfare, as the answering of prayer, and as the Biblical theme of salvation through suffering. In this way, the reading represents the first skirmish in the battle between God and Pharaoh, in which Pharaoh demonstrates the arrogance of all earthly autocrats who believe they are gods. He attempts to manipulate people against themselves and remains aloof from human suffering. God, however, although accused by those he has come to save, identifies with them and continues to promise to save them, despite their anger and their continued suffering (6:1). Out of their suffering will come their deliverance; a theme of great importance for the Bible. In addition, the whole passage reads like a story-description of the problem of 'unanswered prayer'. The people of Israel, and presumably Moses, had prayed for deliverance, they believed in God, but he had not yet acted in the face of aggression. When would He act?

There is one further way of reading these stories which will help us understand them. The stories of this part of Exodus are designed to show the ultimate power and authority of God. Jewish families have read these stories as part of festival celebrations of God's deliverance for centuries, and we should do the same. We know that the Lord is ultimately victorious, and the story is told so that we can look back and laugh at a Pharaoh who was conquered; who puffed out his chest and was defeated! We can also read this story and say, 'Yes, the people of Israel felt abandoned, but in truth they were not, for God came to their rescue even though they had to suffer for years.' This is the power of these stories for today, even in the midst of suffering. In addition, the people of Israel clearly felt their prayers were unanswered, but when we read this story knowing that the Lord brought His people out of Egypt in glory (Ex 14), then we can say that although the people did not understand what was going on, God's purposes for His people were glorious, and worth waiting for!

How much more can we who know the power of Jesus' love and be confident in Him for the Salvation He brings!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Describe to your group any experiences of genuine oppression you have experienced in your lifetime. In what ways was it similar to this story?
2. Why should suffering be expected of those who await God's salvation? Can we not avoid it in some way?
3. If God is victorious in all things, why do we not see this in evidence around us?

Discipleship

It is generally true that the Old Testament was not written to record events in the manner we would write history today, giving a timeline of events which we can imagine ourselves entering into. It was written to be recalled, and with specific messages, which are not to be found in small chunks like a New Testament parable from the teaching of Jesus, for example. Yet people still read the Old Testament as if they expect each small section to have its own 'meaning' and 'text' for preaching. Reflect on how this may have damaged our understanding of the Old Testament and the Bible.

Final Prayer

O Christ, our Morning Star, Splendour of Light Eternal, shining with the glory of the rainbow, come and waken us from the greyness of our apathy and renew us in Your gift of hope. AMEN
(The Venerable Bede)

Prayer

We are Your children, Holy Father. May we honour You and respect Your authority, and grow into the maturity of being men and women of God by doing Your will, serving those we meet, testifying to Your love, and doing nothing which might let you down. And however old we are in age or faith, may we never lose sight of the fact that we are Your children. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the Media and the World

Pray for all honest journalists who seek to bring us news about what is happening in the world without bias or misrepresentation. Some are Christian, and many are not, so pray for those who are that their light may shine, and pray for those who are not, that they may see and report something of the hand of God in the many circumstances in which they find themselves.

Meditation

Lift us up, O Lord, in body, soul and spirit:

Above the world's false securities
Which pretend to protect, but prejudice against the poor.

Above the world's ways of working
Which attempt to be just, but lack true understanding of the spirit.

Above the world's misuse of knowledge
Which glorifies achievement instead of the value of learning.

Above the world's copies of religion
Which appear to offer spirituality, but replace God with 'self'.

Above the world's attempts at governance
Which leave most of humanity in poverty, instead of in peace.

Above the world's casual approaches to love
Which lead to untold anger and bitterness, by rejecting God's love.

And as we demonstrate Your Kingdom in this world,
May we seek to show the better path of Christian life,
Of Jesus Christ who lived a better life, just perfectly.

Bible Study - 5:10-6:1

¹⁰ So the taskmasters and the people's foremen went out and told them. 'This is what Pharaoh says, "I will not give you straw. ¹¹ Go and get straw for yourselves wherever you can find it, but there will be no reduction at all in your workload." ¹² The people had to scatter throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. ¹³ The taskmasters continued to press on, demanding, 'Finish your work, the same daily amount for each day as when you had straw.'

¹⁴ The Israelite foremen appointed by Pharaoh's taskmasters were beaten and interrogated; 'why didn't you complete the quota of bricks for yesterday and today, as previously?' ¹⁵ So the Israelite foremen went and appealed to Pharaoh; 'Why have you treated your servants like this? ¹⁶ We have been given no straw, but have been told; "Make bricks!" Your servants are being beaten but the fault lies with your own people!' ¹⁷ Pharaoh replied; 'You are lazy, lazy! That is why you keep saying "Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord!" ¹⁸ Get off back to work. No straw will be given you, and the number of bricks you must deliver is fixed.' ¹⁹ The Israelite foremen knew they were in deep trouble when they were told the daily quota of bricks would not be reduced. ²⁰ As they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them, ²¹ and they said to them 'The Lord look on you and judge! You have made us stink before Pharaoh and his servants, and you have put a sword in their hand to kill us!'

²² Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why have You treated the people so badly? And why did You send me on such a mission? ²³ Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has mistreated this people, and You have done nothing to

delivered Your people at all.’^{6:1} But the Lord said to Moses, ‘You will now see what I will do to Pharaoh. My strong hand will force him to send the people away; he will drive them out of his country because of my great strength.’

Review

Pharaoh's policy began to work. The simple addition of straw-gathering to the tasks of the Israelites was highly effective in creating havoc; the people were overburdened and they lost faith in Moses and Aaron. As we anticipated in yesterday's passage (5:1-9), Pharaoh regarded Moses' request for the people to worship their God in the desert (5:1,17) as a rebellion against his divine authority within Egypt. Pharaoh responded to the situation with cruelty because he believed he could act as a god and govern the lives of people by his own words. In today's passage, we read firstly about the people's unsuccessful attempts to meet Pharaoh's demands (5:12,13), the cruelty meted out on the foremen when the quotas were not met (5:14), and their consequent appeal to Pharaoh (5:14-16). Pharaoh's response confirmed the Israelite's worst fears (5:17-19), and they vented their anger on Moses and Aaron. They had been sold a message of liberty by it had yielded further cruel punishment (5:20,21).

The story is easy to follow, though it does have some details worth further study. All these incidents led Moses to pray to God (5:22,23) and subsequently the Lord responded with a promise that urged Moses and the people to be patient. They had not been sold a lie and God would indeed act (6:1). You will notice that in many Bibles, the first verse of chapter 6 is presented as if it is part of Moses' vision that comes next (6:2-8), which includes the important promise of the Lord's covenant blessing on the work of Moses and Aaron. However, the chapter break is unhelpful, and we need to spot the fact that verse 1 of chapter 6 is God's immediate answer to Moses' urgent prayer. The Lord reassures Moses and His people that He has not abandoned them, and He will faithfully fulfil His promises.

It is possible to read this passage literally, as if it just part of a fine story with a happy ending, and this is the part in which the plot thickens with the build up to the great plagues of Egypt, and the release of the Israelite people. We have also seen previously (yesterday) that the story gives us an earthly glimpse of a spiritual battle between the One true God and the gods of Egypt represented by the figure of Pharaoh. It is also possible to read this story as a parable about how God answers the prayers of His people and works through suffering to bring redemption; earlier, in Exodus 2:23,24, the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for deliverance, but the answer to that cry took a long time to come. Today's passage represents the time between promise and delivery, when people feel that God is absent and unresponsive, when He is in fact working hard, though not doing what might be expected. Most will understand exactly what the people of Israel felt like, but the fact that they endured this for only a few short years in a history that has spanned millennia offers us a useful perspective for our own experiences. God remains in control of the wider picture.

The story also contains the great themes of faith found throughout the Bible. Here, the humble service of God's people is severely tested, as their daily work became an instrument of torture in the hands of a megalomaniac, with complaint only bringing down further trouble on their heads. Later in the life of God's people, a great prophet (Isaiah) would realise that uncomplaining suffering in menial service was needed for God's eternal work of salvation to be done. He spoke of a 'suffering servant' who did not complain (Isaiah 53), but through whom God would work to establish His authority in the world (Isaiah 52:13-15). Spiritually, this story does not fly so high, but what happened taught Moses a lesson he had to learn about doing God's will, as he faced the wrath of the people (5:22,23). He was right to pray, but the only answer he received was that the Lord would do what he said (6:1) leaving Moses with the personal challenge to continue what he had been told, whatever the cost. Discipleship does not require less of us.

Going Deeper

The pain of the people of Israel is a key feature of the passage we have read today. The whole text builds up the picture of an oppressed people just waiting for deliverance. They were treated unfairly and ruled by an authoritarian dictator who used them as his play-thing. Standing firm in such circumstances is exceptionally hard, and as we read more closely, several important themes emerge from this passage which will feature throughout the rest of Exodus.

Oppression, straw and patience?

The first paragraph of our reading today relentlessly drives home the cruel demands of a Pharaoh who did not recognise God; he only recognised his own authority, and he behaved just

as men who have assumed the same throughout the history of the world. They have kept other people in their place by putting pressure on them through their 'middle management'. Pharaoh had made the decision to oppress the people of Israel (5:7) with the result that the people struggled to meet the demands made on them (5:12). The taskmasters were Egyptian and loyal to Pharaoh, and they were only interested in seeing that the royal command was adhered to. The story line itself is compelling, with the word 'straw' repeated over and over again (8 times in chapter 5), driving home the ridiculous situation in which the people found themselves, scrabbling about all over Egypt for straw. In reality, mud/straw bricks took some time to dry out and harden fully, even in the heat of the Egyptian day, so the 'daily quota' was a complex matter. The taskmasters would have observed that the failure of the Israelites to provide sufficient straw meant that the whole process would gradually deteriorate into inefficiency. Verse 12 describes the way in which 'stubble' was used for 'straw', another indication of the loss of quality as well as quantity of bricks available to meet the 'quota'.

In a simple social structure reduced to unbridled oppression, the consequences were obvious. The taskmasters interrogated and beat the Israelite foremen (5:14). Of itself, this reminds us of the previous time in Exodus when a taskmaster beat a Hebrew man (2:11). On that earlier occasion Moses had responded with wrath, slaughtering the taskmaster. Now he had to stand by, knowing the consequences for his people as they endured continuing oppression, until he could do the work the Lord had told him to do for their liberation. He had confronted Pharaoh, but much more was to come, for he had not yet begun to show the signs and wonders God had given him (4:21).

The middle management 'has a go'

The central episode of this passage consists of the story of the foremen and their attempts to deal with the situation by bringing a reasonable objection to Pharaoh. Having been beaten, the foremen went to Pharaoh with their appeal for a fair hearing. They probably felt that the situation had been created by Moses and Aaron (as they later accused – 5:21) and they stood a better chance of appealing directly to Pharaoh about the work issue by themselves, without any reference to leaving Egypt to go and worship their God. They certainly felt that they had a good and reasonable point to make, for it was impossible to maintain brick production at the rate demanded with the increased pressure because of the lack of straw, and they clearly felt that natural justice and fairness was on their side. They misjudged both the situation and the leader with whom they dealt, and they failed to see that this was itself part of the spiritual warfare raging around them.

The foremen were unsuccessful in their attempts, and Pharaoh repeated to them the same accusations and threats he made earlier (5:4,5,8,9). Finding Moses and Aaron, they took out their frustration on them, complaining in bitterness at what was happening to them because of what they had said and done. They called on the Lord to judge the two elders, using the strongest Hebrew language available to express their disgust (5:21), and suggesting that they believed Pharaoh's intention was to kill them, and moreover, Moses and Aaron had given him an excuse to do so; 'you have put a sword in their hand to kill us!' (5:21).

This was the lowest point of the people's servitude and slavery, but it was all part of what was necessary for God to obtain victory over Pharaoh. From the spiritual point of view, Moses and Aaron had provoked Pharaoh into battle with God, the God of the Israelites, and it was a battle that Pharaoh could not possibly win. Moses had himself shown restraint by not responding to Pharaoh's show of strength with aggression (as he had before), but others needed to keep their heads in the situation as well. We will see as the story of the Exodus unfolds how complaints against Moses and God constantly arose from the people of Israel; and it generally happened precisely when God was fighting strongly for them. It is a major theme of Exodus.

Moses' prayer and God's response

But the trouble with the situation at that time was that no-one could see God at work. Moses had seen and heard God's voice telling him, in general terms, that this would happen, and he shared this with Aaron, and then put it all to the elders and the people of Israel (4:31). At the time, they had expressed faith. Now they needed to persist in faith by standing firm in the midst of oppression and trusting their leaders to fulfil God's commission. If Pharaoh had any small victory at all in the battle against God, it was in setting the people of Israel against themselves, against their leaders Moses and Aaron, and against their God.

If you read through Moses' prayer in verses 22 and 23, you will see that he did not really doubt the mission on which he had been sent. Rather, he expresses puzzlement at what was going on. Clearly, Moses himself did not see Pharaoh as the main reason to complain, because his opening phrase was 'O Lord, why have You treated the people so badly?' (5:22). Moses was