

God Versus Pharaoh, Act I

By Brad Allison on 7/20/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 5-6*

It's never a good idea to hurt a really powerful person just a little bit. It is preferable either to hurt him so much that his power is permanently removed or to leave him alone. But you don't want to hurt him just a little. It would not be advisable for a Junior High student to walk up to the strongest, meanest boy in the school and poke him in the eye. Yet Moses does precisely that, and God was the one who told him to do so. He and Aaron gain an audience with the most powerful man in the world and say to him, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness'" (5:1). Pharaoh refuses in an arrogant way, saying, "Who is the Lord?" He is amazed that someone would dare question his absolute authority. He doesn't know this Lord and he will not submit to him. The people cannot go. So, the battle lines are set, and this is to be a fight between God and Pharaoh for the children of Israel.

After Pharaoh's refusal, Moses pokes him in the eye again, asking a second time, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God." By the way, have you ever wondered why God told Moses to ask for only three days (3:18) when it seems obvious that he wanted a permanent deliverance? God is not being deceptive. What we are seeing in this is simply the normal way negotiations took place in an oriental culture. Someone would ask for something far less than they really wanted, and, if it was granted, ask for more. You can see that when Abraham met with God and asked him if he would spare Sodom if fifty righteous people could be found there. When God says that he would, Abraham goes further and asks if God would also spare the city if only 45 could be found. That's the kind of negotiation Moses was beginning with Pharaoh. Had he said yes to the this request, Moses would have pressed him further until finally he would have agreed to let them go permanently. But he doesn't agree at all, and after Moses has provoked him by making the request, he determines to make things worse for the Israelites. They have made this request only because they are lazy, so Pharaoh will take care of that by making them work even harder.

That's the basic story of this chapter. When we began our study of Exodus several weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the purposes of this story is to teach us the meaning of some very important words in the Bible. In particular the story we find in this chapter teaches us what the word sin means. Sin isn't just breaking some rule. It is far more complex than that. Pharaoh shows us something of the way sin works in our lives. He is a personification of sin, refusing to let us serve the true God and insisting that we serve only him. Sin is our enemy just as much as Pharaoh was an enemy of Israel. Sin is a powerful enemy and an absolute enemy. And sin has us in bondage and doesn't want to let us go. It wants us to serve him and not the true God. Have you ever experienced this power of sin in your own heart? In his book, *The Enemy Within*, Kris Lundgaard begins like this:

All I wanted to do was surprise my wife.

Since we had moved into our new house almost a year ago, the refrigerator door handle had been on the wrong side. I had put off moving it because of my clumsiness with mechanical things. But on this Thursday afternoon while my wife was at work, I was set to redeem myself and right the wrong.

I was halfway through the job. I had the refrigerator and freezer doors off and wanted to get them back on soon so nothing would spoil. I was at the pivotal step of swapping the hinges from the right side of the refrigerator to the left, when I realized that each hinge was fastened by two torx screws. Two lousy torx screws. There is only one tool in the universe that can (safely) remove a torx screw: a torx socket.

I didn't have a torx socket.

Right then my three boys decided to move their Traveling Sibling Rivalry Show into the middle of my angst. I lost it. I let them have it, though they didn't deserve it. They stared at me as if I were a monster from Alpha Centauri, while I ranted in an unknown tongue.

In mid-fit I had an out-of-body experience. I saw my contorted red face screaming at my charming boys and knew at once I was doing something evil... Something had control of me—it was as if an alien had invaded my body and was forcing me to do his bidding (p. 21-22).

Sin acts like a monster that has control of us, just like Pharaoh enslaving God's people. How are we going to be delivered from this great and powerful enemy? This chapter teaches us four things about sin that we need to see if we are going to be delivered from it. Sin is burdensome, relentless, isolating and powerful.

I. Sin Is Burdensome

After Moses' request that Pharaoh would let the people go, he said to Moses and Aaron, "Why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens" (v. 4). It is the nature of sin to be like Pharaoh, always adding burdens to us. Sin burdens us in that whatever we pursue to make us happy never really satisfies, forcing us always to want just a little bit more. The sin of greed is a perfect example. A greedy person is never satisfied, always feeling like he needs just a little bit more in order to be happy. A person lusting after sexual satisfaction is never satisfied, because he always feels like he needs just a little more. When someone seeks the approval of others, no amount of approval deeply satisfies, forcing her to seek ever-escalating amounts. Burdens keep getting added.

Notice too that these burdens are impossible to meet. Pharaoh decided to stop supplying the Israelites with their own straw and made them gather it themselves. At the same time, he didn't lower their daily quota, resulting in an impossible situation. Whenever you try to live your life independent of God, it results in an impossible situation. Here's what that usually looks like. A person decides that in order to be happy, they need to look good before others. So they devote their lives to being successful, attractive and well-educated. But such a pursuit is an attempt to be independent of God, and it's the essence of sin. It results in impossible burdens. Here's the way Charlie Jones words it, as he describes the burdensome life of this kind of sin.

Or perhaps for you women, you have the idol of the all together mom and career woman; a woman who sews her own clothes (size 6), bakes her own bread, is VP of sales at an advertising agency, her house is spic and span, she is on-time picking up the kids from school everyday (because she woke-up at 4:30 am to do administrative work for the agency) and is head of the PTO. She sings in the choir, volunteers at the homeless shelter, brings the best dishes to all the potluck dinners and then calls you to see if there is anything she can help you with in her spare time (*Peculiar Favor*, p. 88).

Illustration: Someone reminded me recently of a scene from the old movie *Ben Hur*. Ben Hur was a slave of the Romans, forced to man an oar in the belly of one of those big Roman ships propelled by several dozen rowers. There is a scene where a Roman officer comes aboard to motivate and lecture these slaves. His concluding words to them are "Row well and live." If that summarizes your life, you're serving Pharaoh rather than the true God.

II. Sin Is Relentless

There is another feature of sin that we discover in this chapter, and that is that it is relentless. This is the point emphasized in verse 19, where the daily nature of their burdensome task is stressed. The ESV nicely preserves this emphasis in its translation. “You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your *daily* task each *day*.” There was a relentless character about this burden. Even if you wore yourself out one day and managed both to gather enough straw and make your full quota of bricks, as soon as the next day begins, you would have to start all over again.

That describes something of the nature of sin. You can't get away from it. It's worse than a bad houseguest, during whose stay you comfort yourself with the thought that at least he will soon be leaving. Sin is a bad houseguest who never leaves. More than that, he dogs your every step while you're in the house and makes your life miserable. You never get a break from sin. Sin springs up to surprise us at all the wrong times. As you prepare for vacation, you imagine leisurely times of satisfying conversation with your wife and delightful play with your children. But even before you get to your destination, the children have been fighting in the backseat and asking for the tenth time how much further it is, and you explode in anger. You can take a vacation from work, but you can't take one from sin, not in this life anyway. The apostle Paul came to this conclusion: “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand” (Romans 7:21). Sin is relentless, dogging us everyday.

III. Sin Isolates

The chapter has lengthy sections describing Pharaoh's speeches and the reactions of Moses and the Jewish leaders. But there is only one verse that describes what is happening with the people. “So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw” (v. 12). Straw was a byproduct of raising grain, being the part left over after the grain was threshed. It was used in the manufacture of bricks because it made the bricks stronger. But since the grain from which straw came was grown widely throughout Egypt, those who gathered were required to travel widely to procure it. Prior to this, even though their enslavement was harsh, they at least could experience the comforts of nearness to family and friends. Now even that was denied them as they were forced to scatter throughout the land in search of straw.

Sin has this same effect. It scatters and isolates us from one another. It's not hard to see why. Sin results in a self-centeredness, and community life is challenged by self-centeredness. If a group of people is together and everyone in the group is asking, “What's in this for me?” that group will not stay together for long. Everyone will be so busy getting their own needs met that no one will be available to serve another. Before long, such a group will disperse. Sin isolates us from one another, resulting in loneliness and depression.

IV. Sin Is Powerful

The main point of this passage becomes evident at the end of the chapter and the beginning of the next. None of Israel's leaders have been effective in delivering them from Pharaoh. The efforts of Moses and Aaron have only made things worse. Beginning in verse 15, we read of the efforts of the Jewish foremen to gain some relief for Israel. They go to Pharaoh and make their appeal to him as best they can. Will it work? Will he relent and lessen his demands? Quite the opposite occurs. Instead of lessening them, he restates them in even stronger language. "You are idle, you are idle;... Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks" (v. 17-18).

Who is left to deliver Israel? There is One. We see what he will do as he responds to Moses' complaint. "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land" (6:1). Did you notice that God not only promises to deliver Israel himself, but that he promises to do so in a way that demonstrates his complete power over Pharaoh. God says that he will work things out so that it is Pharaoh himself who will send them out. Here is a God so powerful that he not only defeats his enemies, but uses them to accomplish his own purposes. In doing what he thinks is against God and his people, Pharaoh only ends up doing what God has declared will turn out for the deliverance of God's people. So complete is God's power that Pharaoh becomes a pawn in his hands. Something similar will happen centuries later with two other mighty kings. In describing the crucifixion, Acts 4:27-28 says, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." God has all power and authority over his enemies and ours, including our great sin natures.

Let's apply this to our sin, because, as we've said, Pharaoh is the personification of sin here. This means that you have no power over your mighty sin nature. You cannot defeat it either by yourself or with the help of another. No amount of wise counseling will be sufficient to help. Only God can overcome this mighty enemy. And God will do so. G. K. Chesterton once said, "If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority." Our Lord is the one with both power and authority, and his authority extends even to our sin. He says to us, "Now you shall see what I will do to your sin." The application is simply to trust God as your deliverer from the great power of sin. Don't underestimate this enemy and think that you can take care of this by yourself, by determining to have more self-discipline. Don't think that there is someone else who can deliver you, such as a counselor or pastor or some accountability partner. God can use self-discipline, and he can use pastors, counselors and accountability partners. But only God can deliver, so look to him.

Conclusion:

Every villain in the fables of our literature has their Achilles' heel. Achilles was unbeatable until Paris shot him in the heel, his only weak spot. Count Dracula ravages Transylvania, drinking the lifeblood of its citizens. He seems unstoppable until you find him asleep in his coffin and pound a wooden stake through his heart. Faith is the wooden stake through the heart of our sin nature. It is only as we look to Jesus in faith everyday that we have any hope of overcoming this powerful enemy of ours.

If you have no sense of the power of sin in your life, may I suggest that the most likely reason is that you do not belong to Jesus. Like a river whose powerful current is not felt until you stop drifting with the current and try to swim upstream, you are drifting along under the power of sin. It was only when Moses confronted Pharaoh that the full opposition of Pharaoh came into play. If there is no struggle with sin, God's word to you is to repent and come to Jesus in faith. May God help us to fight sin with the only weapon that will defeat him—faith in our great God!