
Prayers

To God

Pray in repentance of any sins you are aware of. Then ask the Lord to reveal to you anything that has inadvertently come between you and Him. Be careful about this; it is not an exercise in beating yourselves up over something, but one in which you can find the blessing of real forgiveness through true repentance.

For myself

Pray about your daily work

Ask the lord to help you see your work from a new light, so that your gain new inspiration for the days ahead.

For others

Lord God, bring into Your Church visionaries and prophets, those who will reveal Your gracious will to us and give us a glimpse of what You are planning to do in this world of Yours. Open our hearts to see the things You see, and open our hearts to receive the messengers You send and the benefits of Your marvellous grace. AMEN

Meditation

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

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 forgiveness?
Is He doing a work in you which is not yet clear?
Is He offering you help, and you have not yet accepted?
Is He saying, 'I am here, but please don't turn away ...'

It may be hard to face the Lord
And deal with what you feel just now,
But in your need the Lord will be with you;
and His presence and His promises never fail.

Bible Passage

Exodus 3:16-22

The Lord said to Moses,

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 revelation of His name to Moses, the Lord gave him some clear instructions about what should happen next (3:16-22). The eventual destination of the people after their liberation had already been revealed (3:17, see 3:8f.), but now, a more complete plan emerges, setting out what lies ahead. Most of our passage reveals God’s salvation plan for Israel, in which Moses must firstly go and ask the King of Egypt to liberate Israel (3:18). God also reveals that Pharaoh will not immediately grant this request; he will only be persuaded by the evidence of God’s power (3:19,20). It will be a battle of the gods, and Almighty God will prove His superiority over the king who was believed by his people to be a god, that is, Pharaoh. The evidence will prove so conclusive that the Egyptians themselves will accept it, and assist the Israelites to leave. It is an outrageously bold plan.

God never reveals Himself without some purpose in mind. He has revealed Himself here (3:15) because He intends to save His people from Egypt, to liberate them in a great ‘Exodus’ from the land in which they had been held captive. God’s revelation also has two other great features. It is purposeful and will demonstrate His power and might, but in addition, it will depend on the faithful and obedient work of Moses, the man chosen to be God’s servant and agent in the world for this time. Our passage today is an impressive mixture of these two

essential elements; sovereign work to be done by God (3:17,19f.) and earthly work to be done by Moses (3:16,18). It is God's eternal purpose to achieve His will through cooperation with His people and especially His special chosen servants. He wants partnership with those who will do His will, and when this is achieved, great and wonderful things happen.

Moses' was required to gather the people of Israel together (3:16). This would be no small task, for he had left them forty years previously under something of a cloud. He had put the community in danger by exposing them to the wrath of the Egyptian regime after killing one of their task-masters (2:11-15); what would they think of him now? We will discover in the next chapter of Exodus that Moses is by no means certain of how he will be received by Israel – but more of this later.

Once Moses had gathered the people together, his first job would be to pass on to them his personal testimony. Indeed, how else were they to weigh what he had said? It would be vital for the cause of Israelite liberation that Moses was able to convince the people that the God he had met was the same God who had made them a nation through their ancestors (3:16). We should always remember that the Biblical story is a consistent picture of God's work through the history of the world, and the history of His people. It is not a random sequence of spiritual stories.

Next, Moses must reveal to Israel that the God of their ancestors has indeed heard their cry for help. They had cried out to Him for years (2:23) and must have wondered whether He was listening. But they would now receive proof that He had indeed heard, '*I have been paying close attention to you ...*' (3:16). The first promise God makes to His downtrodden people is this; they are to be liberated, and go to a land '*flowing with milk and honey*' (3:17). This wonderful expression means a number of different things in various parts of Scripture, but here, it is a promise of agricultural settlement and success. Israel had already left behind her roots in the nomadic lifestyle of her ancestors (Abraham etc. – see Genesis 12f.) and if they followed their God and accepted His liberation, they would benefit from the settled life of a nation in a good and fertile land, chosen for them by God Himself.

It was a considerable vision to sell, and we will discover later how difficult it became for Moses to deliver it! But it was important and necessary before what would happen next. Moses was to go to Pharaoh together with the elders of Israel, present a united front and ask for their liberty (3:18)! What nerve! Using Moses' story of meeting with God as the opening gambit, they would ask to go and worship their God in the desert! We might think it rather deceptive to do this knowing that Israel was intent on escape. But God knew the deception that lay in the hardened heart of Pharaoh. His tactics were to draw out the king's stubborn resistance (3:19).

The Lord then prophesied the plagues of Egypt, those great and controversial miracles that were performed in the land in order to subdue Pharaoh's hard heart (3:19). If we do not know the details of each plague, then we know their true nature and purpose. They make one of the great stories of the Old Testament, combining the eternal purposes of God with events of mysterious horror on a national scale. When we come to studying the plagues in more detail we will find they are not merely a repetitious 'awe and wonder' narrative, but an intricate spiritual negotiation between God's servant and Pharaoh, His opponent. But we are forewarned that this will be a troubled time (3:19,20). Any communication with the king of Egypt was fraught with danger, as is clear from ancient Egyptian records. Moses' past court experience would be invaluable.

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 would therefore think it imperative to keep them oppressed so that they would not create trouble. Israel would have to fight against this deep-seated fear in Pharaoh, and would need the help of God's '*mighty hand*' (3:19,20). Then, at the point where

human resources were not sufficient, God would act to 'strike the Egyptians' (3:20), triggering the release of the people.

At the end of our passage, we read an astonishing brief paragraph which speaks of Israel gaining the favour of the people of Egypt, so much so that they hand over to them much of their wealth in terms of gold, silver and clothing (3:21,22). This is the prophecy of what would come to be called Israel's 'plunder of the Egyptians'. Just as the events about to unfold would bring God glory, Israel's obedience would bring its rewards too. The word for 'glory' in the Old Testament means, in an earthly sense, 'wealth' and 'honour'. This is just what Israel would take from Egypt!

So God's prophecy has been set out and we know that He intends to make this happen. Israel will be liberated, whether Pharaoh likes it or not. In the next chapter, we will read about Moses' misgivings at the plan and his own personal role in it. When God acts, His servants need to respond by accepting the vision and being obedient. There is no room for prevarication when it comes to partnership with God in the affairs of this world!

Going Deeper

Further Comments

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

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!

God's care over detail

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!

Bargaining

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.

The plundering of the Egyptians

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 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.

Discipleship

Application

Working with God

At first, 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, and always seeking to use those who are willing to do His will.

Obedience, and finding God's provision in the midst of life

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.

Partnership and communication

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!

Ideas for what to do

- What is God asking you to work with Him at today? This is a serious question, for the Lord God seeks men and women who will work with Him to do His work today, in small ways and in great ways. Are you ready?
- Pray about your future, and how you can work together with Your Lord in what he wants of you. Be encouraged because the Lord God wants to bless you as well as work with you, as He did with His people Israel.

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?

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
