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## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: Giving thanks to God for His Word*

*Read the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2, and praise God for sending His Son Jesus into the world. Praise Him for the salvation He brings and witnesses to in His Word.*

### For myself

You have enlivened my spirit, Lord God. From the depths of despair, You have helped me to find security of heart and soul; from the darkness of habitual sin, You have brought me into a place of great brightness; from a treacherous pathway that has led me nowhere, You have led me into the way that directs the soul heavenward. Praise You, Lord Jesus, for You are always doing this work in me; never let me forget this!

**AMEN**

### For others

*Pray today for the people you meet; say a prayer that commits them into God's hands and blesses them. Anything else will follow from this.*

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## Meditation

Holy Lord, place me under the challenge of Your discipline;  
So my whole being may rejoice and respond to Your call.

If I am impatient, give me respect for Your gift of time;  
So I do not miss the Gospel perspective on life.

If I am unsettled, touch my life with Your peace;  
So I do not affect others by my anxiety.

If I am distressed, calm my feelings by Your presence;  
So I do not grieve others by appearing self-centred.

If I am intemperate, moderate my heart by Your love;  
So I do not compromise Your Gospel by my excess.

If I am stubborn, challenge my persistent inflexibility;  
So I do not show hardness of heart towards others.

If I am wilful, break me down by Your power;  
So I may be built up in Your love, and liberated!

Holy Lord, place me under the challenge of Your discipline;  
So my whole being may rejoice and respond to Your call.

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## Bible Passage

### Exodus 4:18-31

<sup>18</sup> Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him,

*'Let me return to my own people in Egypt and see whether they are still alive.'*

And Jethro said to Moses,

*'Go in peace.'*

<sup>19</sup> Now, the LORD had said to Moses in Midian,

***'Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.'***

<sup>20</sup> So Moses took his wife and his sons, mounted them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt. Moses took with him in his hand, the staff of God.

<sup>21</sup> And the LORD said to Moses,

***'On your return to Egypt, consider all the wonders I have enabled you to do, and perform them in front of Pharaoh. However, I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. <sup>22</sup> Then you will say to Pharaoh,***

*"This is what the LORD says: Israel is my son, my firstborn, <sup>23</sup> so I told you to let my son go, that he might worship me, but you refused to let him go. Now I will kill your firstborn son."*

<sup>24</sup> On the journey, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him (that is, Moses) and sought to kill him. <sup>25</sup> Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his feet with it, and said,

*'You are a bridegroom of blood for me!'*

<sup>26</sup> Then God let him go (that is, when she said 'a bridegroom of blood', with reference to circumcision).

<sup>27</sup> The LORD told Aaron to go into the desert to meet Moses, so he went. He met him at the mountain of God, and greeted him with a kiss. <sup>28</sup> Moses then told Aaron about everything the LORD had sent him to say, and about all the signs He had commanded him to do.

<sup>29</sup> Moses and Aaron gathered together all the elders of the Israelites. <sup>30</sup> Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. <sup>31</sup> The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down in worship.

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## Review

This reading is a series of six short incidents around the theme of Moses' return to Egypt, and they add to our picture of God's work through Moses. In order, they are:

1. Moses clears his return to Egypt with his father-in-law (4:18)
2. God tells Moses to return to Egypt, and he does so, taking his family (4:19)
3. The Lord instructs Moses concerning what he should say to Pharaoh (4:20-23)

4. On the journey, the Lord tries to kill Moses, and her son is circumcised (4:24-26)
5. Aaron meets Moses and Moses tells Aaron everything (4:27,28)
6. Moses and Aaron meet the elders of Israel and are accepted by them (4:29-31)

All these are important story fragments, though some are more significant than others. Clearly, the writer is keen to move the story on to the story of the great battle between Moses and Pharaoh to obtain the freedom of Israel.

Of these story elements, the first two follow the story line. However, the next two, numbers 3 and 4, contain information critical for the story ahead. Story element 3 contains instructions given to Moses about what he should say to Pharaoh on his return, including the threat against Pharaoh's 'firstborn' (4:23). Story element 4 contains the story about Moses' journey back to Egypt and a strange incident in which God attempts to kill Moses, told alongside an odd story about Zipporah circumcising of her son (4:24-26). Lastly, story elements 5 and 6 indicate the Lord's control of what would be a crucial time for Israel. Moses and Aaron meet to prepare for the task ahead (4:27 and 28), and finally, God's message is accepted by the elders of Israel (4:29-31).

The first story element is to our ears unremarkable (4:18,19). We might not be so dutiful today, but in ancient times, it would have been bad form for Moses to leave the employment of his father-in-law without telling him. Verse 18 tells us that Moses was culturally correct, though we will discover later on that the story of Moses' family is quite complex; for although Zipporah began by going to Egypt with Moses, it seems that she either did not go there or she returned to her father at some date. Exodus reports that Moses sent her home at some point, and they were reunited after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt (18:2). We will find out more about this later on.

The next two verses (4:19,20) tell us that the Lord God told Moses to return to Egypt because '*all those who were seeking for your life are dead*'. In ancient Egypt, the rule of one Pharaoh was different from another, as the Israelites experienced when one treated Joseph and his family as honoured guests, but the next regarded them as the scum of the land (1:8f.). God told Moses that there had, in effect, been a change of government and it was safe for him to return.

The message Moses had to deliver to Pharaoh (4:21-23) is not easy to read. At first, the Lord tells Moses that He would make Pharaoh obstinate. This sounds ominous, but it may have been re-assurance, for if the Lord was controlling Pharaoh like this, then the outcome of their confrontation would surely be according to God's will. But the darkest part of this passage is God's threat to kill Pharaoh's 'firstborn' (4:23). This warns us about what the Lord intended to do to finally break Pharaoh's will. It also prefigures God's work of salvation in every age, in which death must be confronted and defeated so that His will is done, and this is an important part of our understanding of Christ's work on the Cross.

Nevertheless, we find such an atrocity very difficult, especially from the hand of God. But apart from its significance in redemption history, this story is about the survival of nations, and also of God's covenant people. The social conditions of the day were such that the very stability of society rested upon rights of inheritance that were passed on through 'firstborn' sons, a subject that dominates the stories of all the patriarchs, (e.g. Genesis 22). So here in this passage, we read for the first time in Scripture that Israel is God's 'son' (4:22), and the threat against Pharaoh's 'firstborn' is set against this revelation. In summary, the story of the Exodus could be condensed like this; the son who resists God's will is condemned, but the son who will bear God's covenant is saved.

The strange story in 4:24-26 may seem at first to be unexplainable. Certainly, something was wrong between God and Moses, for God tried to kill Moses (4:24). What could this mean? Some think that God did this to get back at Moses because of his continual objections, as we read earlier (4:1-17); but this makes God appear vengeful. Another

possibility could be that this had something to do with circumcision, because we are told that after Zipporah circumcised her son, the Lord stopped His attack (4:26). So it could be that God considered Moses unworthy of the task he had been given because he had not been obedient to the basic covenant command given to Abraham, to circumcise his sons (see Genesis 17). Some scholars feel that if we 'join up the dots' in the story elements we have of Moses' family, this incident becomes more understandable. The theory is this; after these troubled events, Moses returned Zipporah to her father because it would have been difficult for the journey to continue with a child who had just been circumcised. This explains why Moses 'sent his wife back home' (see 18:2) and was reunited with his family later.

The fifth story element describes the meeting of Moses and Aaron, a pairing vital to the future enterprise of setting Israel free (4:27,28). Exodus reports that the two leaders were as one, as indicated by their 'kiss', and their sharing about the task ahead (4:28). Aaron would have an important role as speaker for Moses and also as one responsible for certain 'signs'.

Then in the last part of this passage and chapter, Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt and reported to the elders of Israel. The story of what happened next continues in the next chapter and is quite complex. However, when Moses and Aaron first told the elders about their experience of God and what they planned, they were received well and their message was accepted (4:30). The very last verse contains a fascinating sentence, in which it says that after hearing that God was concerned for their future, the elders had 'faith' in God and bowed down in worship (4:31). Throughout the Bible, this is the right way for people to respond to God, and this was exactly the right start for Moses and his God-given mission. But things were to get worse before they were to get better, as we shall now discover in the next chapter of Exodus.

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## Going Deeper

### ***Further Comments***

Each of these five passages adds to the gradual build up of the Exodus story, but some are far more interesting to us than others. The more mysterious of the stories all concern first-born sons; Israel as God's firstborn, Pharaoh's 'firstborn', and Moses' firstborn, Gershom. Fitting these together in order to get a sense of what was really happening at this critical time is quite a challenge!

### ***Setting out on the journey (vv18-20)***

The journey Moses embarked upon was an act of faith. Up to this point of time, Moses had prevaricated and argued with God about what he had been asked to do, but now he accepted the role God had given him and began to put into action what he had been told. He was polite in asking the permission of his father-in-law (4:18), but really only seeking the proper permission to take Zipporah and their sons. Moses did not tell Jethro what God had told him, nor anything about his work to set the people of Israel free. It is possible that they had talked about this because the text of Scripture tells us so little about what really happened, but the probability is that they had not, for Jethro was hardly likely to let his daughter go on such a dangerous mission, if he knew what it was!

In leaving, verse 20 notes that 'Moses took with him, in his hand, the staff of God.' Earlier this staff had been described as Moses' staff, but the change of description indicates the change of heart that had taken place, for Moses now accepted that he was doing the things of God, and not pursuing his own will. The staff will play an important role in the rest of Exodus, and we will come across it in several different episode of the great story of the Exodus.

### ***The Lord's words to Moses (vv21-23)***

A distinction is normally made between the miracles and wonders Moses was ordered to perform to make the Israelites believe (4:1-9), and the great plagues which Moses brought on Egypt as signs and wonders to persuade Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. In this passage, Moses is called upon by the Lord to consider the first of these, and then do them in front of Pharaoh; so there is an overlap between the two. Certainly the first of the signs has a resemblance to the first plague (7:8f.), and the third sign resembles the second plague (7:17f.), but there is no clear parallel to the second sign given to Moses, the sign of the leprous hand.

Some believe that this instruction gave Moses a starting place for his confrontation with Pharaoh, and that the last part of this speech gave the final one, the death of Pharaoh's 'firstborn' (see above). For the Lord, this confrontation was personal, and He was going to control it. Pharaoh pretended to be a 'god', so God would treat him as an equal in a battle for their respective firstborn which God alone would win. In this way, the warning from God to Pharaoh was that if he really was a god, he would be able to protect his inheritance (his 'firstborn'), but that when God obtained the victory, He would necessarily destroy the inheritance of Pharaoh because he sought a divine status to which he was not entitled. This is not language we readily understand, but it is the language of the culture of Moses and Pharaoh.

### ***Circumcision, Moses, Zipporah and God (vv24-26)***

Along with the surprise that the Lord might want to kill Moses, you might be surprised at my translation of these verses, particularly in the section which describes what Zipporah did after removing Gershom's foreskin, and it does not make easy or pleasant reading today; 'Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his (Moses') private parts with it ...' (4:25). However, it is now well established that the Hebrew word for 'feet' was a euphemism for genitals (see also Isaiah 7:20, Ezekiel 16:25, Deut 28:57), which explains why I have translated the verse in this way.

What could possibly explain such strange actions? There are a number of possibilities, but I will explain only one which I consider reasonable. When Moses was born and adopted into Egyptian society, there is no record of his circumcision; however, if Moses was to join his own people in Egypt, the people of Israel, this would certainly be an issue. Moses had most likely been circumcised as an Egyptian with a cut in the foreskin rather than the removal of it, something which the Israelite people regarded with abhorrence. God had commanded circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, and those who were not circumcised were to be 'cut off' from God's people (Gen 17:14); and this may explain the sentence in this passage which says that the Lord sought to kill Moses.

Zipporah, realising what was going on, proceeded to circumcise her son, Gershom immediately, touching Moses' private parts with the blood and saying what she would have known from her Midianite background as the right 'ritual' thing for a woman to say to a circumcised husband (the mysterious phrase 'you are a bridegroom of blood to me'). God then accepted her act as equivalent to circumcision for Moses, and left him alone! Now, all this sounds very odd, but it does fit with what we know of ancient practice, and it does not (like other explanations found in commentaries) require any alteration of the Hebrew text of Scripture in order to make sense. It is not easy reading, but this is the closest we can get to what it may have meant.

### ***Moses meets Aaron, and goes on to Egypt (vv27-31)***

The last two elements of this passage are brief and to the point. Firstly, we are told about Aaron's meeting with Moses. Earlier, (4:14) we were told that Aaron was being called out of Egypt to meet Moses, so it is natural that here we have the story of the actual meeting. Most of the people of Israel at that time were under slavery, so most scholars reckon that Aaron

was already an elder within Israel, holding some kind of office. This would have given him the time and opportunity to come and meet Moses in advance of his arrival in Egypt, and also accounts for his ability to speak well, mentioned earlier (4:12f.).

The rest of the book of Exodus is now set up by the faith expressed by the people of Israel when they received Aaron and Moses (4:31). Certainly, if we are right about Aaron, he smoothed the way to Moses' ready acceptance into the life of the people of Israel, something he had not achieved earlier in his life (2:11-15). We now wait to see what happens!

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***The providence of God***

This passage certainly has its fair share of difficulties, and verse 24-26 are reckoned to be amongst the most difficult to interpret in all Exodus. Nevertheless, it helps us connect between the early stories of Moses and his encounter with God, and all that follows in the book of Exodus. It speaks to us of God's extraordinary providence and guidance, even through disturbing and troublesome events (see 4:24), and if we can put aside our apprehension about the details of some of the obscure cultural issues which we do not understand today, then we can be inspired by the way in which the Lord works to achieve His purposes. If we are willing to keep pace with the Lord then we can find more of His providence and care.

#### ***Having faith and worshipping God***

Certainly, at the end of the text, we are in a place of relative comfort, after the torrid nature of Moses' journey from Midian and the disturbing message about the killing of Pharaoh's 'firstborn'. When God's people come together to express faith, then He is able to work for them in powerful ways. The story is not over yet, of course, but starting points such as these are essential for any spiritual endeavour or for any mighty work of God. How many times have we all said today that God will surely work a wonder of renewal in our midst when His people come together to worship Him, in the 'spirit and truth' of Jesus Christ in whom we all believe? The events in this story all happened in Old Testament times, but they still connect with us today.

#### ***Handling difficult passages***

How easy do you find it to handle difficult passages of Scripture? Do you feel an urge to investigate it, or to simply leave it as it is and accept it as a mystery? It is an important point, for it is quite possible to go too far and presume too much into texts which are mysterious precisely because we know little of their background. However, the reason why most people like to explore difficult texts is because God has placed them in His Word, and has presumably done so for a purpose, and this purpose is what the disciple should always seek to discover!

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- What do you need from God right now in order to do His will? It is important to make such an assessment so that we can pray realistically and perceive what God is doing

for us. Too often, we carry on from day today without reaching out to God who wants to bless us with His provision. We think we are OK and do not perceive our weaknesses; but if we know our needs, we will ask the Lord to provide, and this is what it means to 'live by faith'

- Read again this passage of Scripture and make sure that you understand each part. This will help you as you continue your study of Exodus.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss in your group the analysis of the incident in verse 24-26. Do you find this explanation helpful or does it make the passage more difficult for you?
2. Which of the five stories most helps you to understand the rest of the book of Exodus?
3. Is faith essential for the Lord to do any great work of power amongst His people, in Old or New Testament times?

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## **Final Prayer**

My life is hidden with You, Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God. I am Yours, for better or worse, when I feel good and when I feel bad, when I am happy and when I am dispirited. You, O Lord, understand all this when I do not. Make sense of it all to me: AMEN

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