
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Giving thanks to God for His Word

Look through the table of contents at the beginning of your Bible, and reflect on the large variety of literature contained within its books, and its considerable age. Give thanks to God for His consistent revelation, which has unfolded throughout history.

For myself

What plans do you have for the future, if any? Place these plans before the Lord and ask for the courage and the skill to achieve them; seek those spiritual gifts that will enable you to do God's will for you.

For others

Come, Lord Jesus, into this world of Yours and set it free. Come to the poor and bless them with abundance; come to the rich and bless them with compassion; come to those who suffer and bless them healing; come to the weary and bless them with true peace. Come, Lord Jesus, into this world of Yours and set it free! **AMEN**

Meditation

A prayer is ... words spoken to the God of all Creation;
A prayer is ... silence in the presence of the Almighty;
A prayer is ... honesty in speech before the Lord who loves you;
A prayer is ... sheer joy and adulation, thanksgiving and love.

A prayer is like powerful music which fills the soul;
A prayer is like the cascading sounds of inexpressible tongues;
A prayer is like a freedom of spirit in God's throne-room of grace;
A prayer is like stillness, before the awesome Cross of Christ.

Rejoice! You have the greatest of life's treasures
Prayer is the greatest privilege and spiritual
Be free, and feel the Spirit's wind - your soul is free!
The One who gave you life talks now with you, and you with Him.

Bible Passage

Exodus 5:1-9

¹ After this, Moses and Aaron went and spoke to Pharaoh,
'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says:

“Release my people, and let them travel to worship me in the desert”

² Pharaoh answered,

‘Who is the Lord, that I should listen to him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and neither will I let Israel go!’

³ Then they said,

‘the God of the Hebrews has revealed Himself to us. Now, let us travel for three days into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord our God, otherwise He will punish us with plagues or with the sword.’

⁴ But the king of Egypt said,

‘Moses and Aaron, why do you lead the people away from their work: get back to your labour!’

⁵ Pharaoh said,

‘Now look at this large number of common people, and you want to stop them working?’

⁶ That same day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters and the people’s foremen;

⁷ ‘You will no longer supply the people with straw for their brick making as in the past, but make them go and gather straw for themselves, ⁸ but you will demand the same number of bricks from them as before; do not reduce the number. They are lazy, which is why they are demanding, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ ⁹ Set harder work for the men so that they work at it and pay no attention to deception.’

Review

Here, Moses and Aaron arrive in Egypt to liberate God’s people from slavery, and the story of their liberation begins now. The first four chapters of Exodus give us some background to this story, and they prepare us for a confrontation with Pharaoh in which Moses and Aaron are God’s obedient servants. On reflection, there is so much more we might like to know about what happened, for example, about how Moses and Aaron gained access to the court, or about how long they had to wait to see this powerful autocrat. Nevertheless, Scripture is characteristically brief, and the story we are told is focussed on the details of the confrontation between God and Pharaoh. This is a story that can inspire all who seek to do God’s will.

Moses and Aaron began by putting Israel’s demands to Pharaoh (5:1). They asked permission to go into the desert to worship God, and in those days, this may have seemed to them a straightforward request. But Pharaoh was hesitant (5:2). He was naturally suspicious and may well have wondered whether his population of slaves were after far more. Moreover, why should he pay attention to Moses and Aaron, or concede to their God? He believed he was the supreme god of Egypt and saw no need to grant this request unless it was in his own interests.

Moses and Aaron continued by claiming they had met with the ‘*God of the Hebrews*’ (5:3), who said that they would be punished if they did not worship Him! This is extraordinary, because in the story so far we have heard nothing of this. Moses and Aaron may have been stretching a point, but perhaps there was here a veiled threat that if they were punished by God, such punishment would affect Egypt. But for whatever reason, Pharaoh was not

impressed. He accused the two leaders of distracting the Hebrew people from their work, and told them, at first, to go back to it (5:4,5).

No ancient reader of this story would be surprised at this; the exchanges merely set out the battle ground for what would follow. Moses and Aaron were right to tell Pharaoh that it was God who wanted His people to worship Him, and Pharaoh, as a typical tyrannical ruler, was right to anticipate trouble. The heart of the matter was control of the people. Pharaoh had no intention of releasing his grip on the people and the work they did for him, and God had no intention of allowing Pharaoh to continue his ruthless rule. We all know that the battle was about to start in earnest, but Pharaoh decided to defend his interests. Believing the Hebrew people to be 'lazy' (5:8) because they wanted time off to worship, he increased their work with punishing additional demands (5:7-9). In this way, he ensured they could think of nothing else apart from their work and survival; it was the tactic of tyrants then, as now.

Read like this, the story appears straightforward, and it points ahead. However, we need to challenge some of our assumptions about what was happening, for if we read this passage as a true oriental story, then we find that there is more within it than we may have thought. Firstly, this passage, together with the following chapters in Exodus are best read not as a confrontation between Moses (with Aaron) and Pharaoh, but as a confrontation between the Lord as the God of the Israelites, and Pharaoh as the god of Egypt. Remember, from the point of view of the ancients, Pharaoh was regarded as a god in his own right.

Read like this, Pharaoh's response to Moses in verse 2 was his way of dismissing the Lord, he said, *'who is the Lord that I should listen to him ...'*. From his point of view, no other god had any authority in Egypt. Now, the name *'The Lord'* was God's name, and it had been revealed just recently to Moses; but as far as Pharaoh was concerned, this was just another deity of some of the peoples in Egypt, and he rejected them all. Moses then replied on God's behalf, saying *'the Lord our God'* should not be refused (5:3). Pharaoh's response was predictably terse; he regarded such talk as *'deception'* and immediately sought to establish his own authority by commanding more work (5:9). He believed his divine authority was expressed in power over people's lives, and his imposition of extra hard work on the people was a direct challenge to God, as represented by Moses and Aaron.

One other theory has been put forward as to why Pharaoh acted in this way, and connects this passage with the information we learned about Egypt and the Hebrew people in Exodus chapter 1. We are told there that the Hebrew people were growing in number rapidly (2:12f.), and so Pharaoh would have seen their request to worship as evidence of their increased sense of nationality unity. Naturally, he did not want those working in his land to develop in this way, because it could foment trouble in the land (1:8-10); Pharaoh's solution to the problem was to prescribe more work.

We can also understand this story better if we remember that bargaining was then a different matter than now. When we bargain today, we start by making offers well within our reach and hope to arrive at a compromise deal. However, ancient bargaining procedure begins with a slight, almost casual expression of interest, and the negotiations gather pace and interest and detail until a full price is agreed. This begins to explain why Moses and Aaron began by bringing a small request to Pharaoh. The request for a three day journey to worship the Lord in the desert (5:1) would have been normal for nomadic groups of the day. But Pharaoh was not going to give Israel even the most basic of religious freedoms (5:4,7f.). It was obvious to him that Moses and Aaron wanted much more, hence his rejection of them.

What can we learn from such a story? Well, in an age in which people so often want everything to be dealt with now, for revival to happen straight away, and for all problems to be solved with immediately, one thing stands out. The story of redemption and salvation here in Exodus is going to take some time, and if Israel are to be set free then Moses and Aaron are going to have to pursue their work on God's behalf over a long period of time. God

certainly wants to do a great deal for us in an instant, but how much more does He want to do for us and with us over a longer period of time!

Going Deeper

Further Comments

The two halves of this passage are nevertheless intriguing. The opening section sets out the spiritual starting point of the bargaining between Israel and Egypt, and the second section tells us about the brick production demanded of the Israelites. Tomorrow's passage will take this story much further, but it reveals a great deal about Pharaoh, the man who stood between God and His people.

The request for a 'hagg'

It is relatively easy to see how the two requests made by Moses and Aaron increase demand between verses 1 and 3. The initial request was for a 'hagg', a traditional nomadic pilgrimage into the desert for the purposes of sacrifice and homage to a god. The Hebrew word 'hagg' is the root from which the name 'Haggai' (meaning 'festival') comes, and from which comes the word 'Hadji', used today of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. It appears that although Moses and Aaron spoke boldly to declare the newly revealed name of the Lord (5:1) to Pharaoh, their request was put into a form of language that would have been familiar to the king of Egypt. Then, after Pharaoh's initial rejection, Moses and Aaron modified their words, talking about the God of the Hebrews (instead of the Israelites), defining their length of travel as three days and identifying their purpose as sacrificial worship. This much was what the Lord had told Moses in His speech after the incident of the burning bush on the mountain (4:16-18).

What they said at the end of their small speech was more creative, however. They said that the Lord would punish 'with plagues and swords' (5:3) if the Israelites were not allowed to leave. This is not what the Lord had said however, but He had told Moses and Aaron to perform signs before Pharaoh as well as the people of Israel (4:21). These signs included the use of snakes and diseases (4:1-8), things which could broadly be called 'plagues', and also the threat of death, implicit in pouring Nile water on the ground, turning it into blood (4:9). The expression 'with plagues and swords' in verse 3 was therefore no 'made up' addition on the part of Moses and Aaron as if to hype up the situation, it was a good summary of what the Lord had in store for everyone in Egypt before the people of Israel would finally be let go.

Pharaoh's rejection of God

Pharaoh's first answer to Moses and Aaron (5:2) is a flat denial of the authority of the God of the Hebrew people in the midst of Egypt. Firstly, he did not recognise the name; from the pantheon of gods available to be worshipped in Egypt, he had never heard of this 'god' before, and from Pharaoh's perspective, he had no authority in Egypt. From the point of view of the reader of Scripture, we know before we start that although things will get difficult for the people of Israel, God will prevail, because He is the Creator of the whole world, and is not confined to any one time or place. But Pharaoh had no concept of such a god.

The second interesting point about Pharaoh's response is that although Moses and Aaron had requested only a 'hagg' religious observance, Pharaoh responded by saying 'neither will I let Israel go!' (5:2). It is difficult to convey this in English, but this implies more than a response to the request for a 'hagg'. It is possible that Pharaoh perceived that Moses and Aaron had come to negotiate the full release of the people; he knew how to bargain, and if he was prepared to join in, his response would have been some kind of prevarication, but his flat refusal sent a clear message. He would not. This fulfilled what Moses and Aaron had

already been told by the Lord, that Pharaoh would be stubborn and refuse to let Israel go (4:21).

Piling on the pressure

Pharaoh was a good enough autocrat to know that if a subservient people started to make demands upon an absolute ruler, then that ruler should increase pressure on the people to prevent them from continuing their demands! In addition, the Israelites had made demands to him, together with a threat (5:3), so he proceeded to place a demand on them, but as the sole ruler of Egypt, his words would be carried out! What he said (5:4f.) was an act of contempt against Moses and the God he represented, from one who considered himself a god.

Pharaoh observed a '*large number of common people*' (5:5). Although it does not say that these are Israelites, the text does not make much sense unless it is. Pharaoh was evidently unhappy at the large number of Israelites, even though they were making bricks for him; and this gives us the impression that although brick making was obviously a relevant task in ancient times, it was not a job of the highest importance. Mud bricks with varying quantities and qualities of straw within them have been found at archaeological sites dating from such times and they were the common building material for houses; but they did not have the longevity of the stone used for palaces or other grand imperial projects such as the pyramids and tombs. In other words, the purpose of the labour was the labour itself rather than the bricks produced. This explains why Pharaoh was not interested in increasing the quota; that was irrelevant, he simply wanted to increase the burden for the sake of cruelty.

In addition, Pharaoh's actions were a standard form of 'divide and rule' policy rolled out to keep the people subservient, and he did this by creating a potential conflict within the community between the people and their own leaders. Verse 6 talks of 'taskmasters' and 'people's foremen'. These two roles were not the same; 'taskmasters' were Egyptian overseers responsible to the court for the projected work, but 'people's foremen' were Israelites, responsible to their taskmasters for the work done by the people. By requiring the Israelites to gather their own straw rather than providing it, Pharaoh placed a cruel pressure on the working environment which would potentially create division between the Israelites and their own foremen, caught in the middle. The additional gathering of straw would have to be required by the foremen, but it would be resented by the people, and it would be difficult for the foremen to require more work of their compatriots without some degree of unpleasantness. This, of course, served Pharaoh's purposes very well.

Discipleship

Application

Facing opposition and being patient

The reading today is something of an opening salvo in the battle to come. Spiritually, God stands above the aggravation of one such as Pharaoh, but we can easily see how everything that happened must have been very difficult for Moses and Aaron. They would have known that rejection of their message was likely, for the Lord had told them that Pharaoh would have a hard heart; but knowing this in advance does not necessarily help! Most of us have been in situations where we face battles knowing that there will be resistance but we have to persevere. Opposition is not something any of us wish to face, especially when it results in pain and sacrifice required of our own families, as would have been the case for the people of Israel.

How to face rejection

Tomorrow, we will read more about how this situation evolved, and there are many more chapters of Exodus which describe it. They tell about how we must fight spiritual battles if God's work is to be done in this world, and the message which comes from this text today is that like Moses and Aaron, we must remain true to our calling and stick closely to what the Lord has given us to do. There are many 'Pharaohs' today who are capable of rebuffing every argument, every action, and every venture we are engaged in, and there is no escape from them. Sometimes, Christians imagine that if they find the right scheme or the right way of doing things, then they will be able to act without having to face the attacks of an enemy. This is an illusion, and if the story of Moses and Aaron helps us to understand this, it will have done something of its job, even though its origins in the Old Testament mean that it does not have the benefit of the example of Christ. But we should never forget that although Jesus had not 'come' in Old Testament times, His saving power was always present through God the Father.

Facing a long battle

Have you been in the position of beginning to 'fight a battle' in the spiritual sense, which you know will take a long time? This can happen, for example, if you are led by God to work with others to make changes in the life of a church in order to allow the Gospel to become its priority instead of the maintenance of human needs. There are many ways that the Lord can call us to challenge the world and pursue His will, but the only way we can do it is to keep our own spiritual integrity through prayer and the disciplines of faith.

Ideas for what to do

- What battles do you face now, and who are your 'enemies'? Think about this carefully, because it can be easy to get the wrong perspective on things and identify the wrong enemies. Pray to make sure that your perception of things is indeed godly.
- When you look at the leaders of the nations today, are some of them acting like gods? In what ways do people stand in the way of God's work today, so that a battle is required if His will is to be done?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If God is in control of all things, why does He require His people to endure the tough call of spiritual battle?
2. Discuss in your group the possible effects on the Israelites of the requirement to find their own straw.
3. In what ways do we come across people like Pharaoh today? Is 'spiritual warfare' a suitable way of describing how to handle them?

Final Prayer

Holy Lord, God of power and might; raise up people amongst us who will set a high standard of spiritual integrity and godliness. May we have leaders to inspire us, and friends who will work with us to build the Kingdom in our midst; in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour: AMEN

