

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.

Application

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.

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.

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?

Discipleship

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.

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

Prayer

Lead us through our suffering and distress, Lord God, to the place of praise. Lead us through our failures and those of others, Lord God, to a place of peace. And where we fail to understand the path we tread, may we know that in Your providence, no breath, no word, no action nor intent of ours has ever been wasted; for You take all to build Your kingdom: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Media and the World

Pray today for the news you have read today in your own country. Read it or listen to it carefully, and if you do not find out enough to pray adequately, use the internet to find out more. Allow the Lord to lead you in your spirit's quest for words, and express your feelings as you are led. If the Lord tells you something as a consequence of your prayer, then do what He says.

Meditation

A prayer is ... words spoken to the God of Creation;
A prayer is ... silence in the presence of the Almighty;
A prayer is ... spoken honesty, stumbling towards the Lord;
A prayer is ... all-sufficient, when our hearts are full of joy.

A prayer is like music for Christ which fills the soul;
A prayer is like inexpressible tongues of love for the Lord;
A prayer is like freedom of spirit in the Throne-room of Grace;
A prayer is like stillness, before the awesome Cross of Christ.

Rejoice! You have the greatest of life's treasures
If your soul is safe and free to feel the Spirit's wind;
And in the brightest and the darkest of your hours,
The One who gifted life itself communes with you, and you with Him.

Bible Study - 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

The great story of how God used Moses and Aaron to liberate His people from Egypt begins here. The first four chapters of Exodus give us the background to understand the story, and

they prepare us for a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. Our passage describes how Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh, and God's demands were put almost exactly as they had been given to Moses by God (5:1,3). Pharaoh was naturally resistant to this and at first he sought to distance himself from Moses and Aaron (5:2). Then, in the second half of the passage (5:4-9) we read about a tougher response from Pharaoh. For when he saw that a large number of people following Moses and Aaron had stopped work, he reacted as a typical tyrannical ruler. He attempted to bypass the problem by placing a heavier burden of work on the people, who he saw as restless and 'lazy' (5:8).

Read like this, the story does not appear to have many complications, and it clearly points forward to the increasing tension of the story 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'. From his point of view, no other god had any authority in Egypt. 'The Lord' was the name of God revealed to Moses, but as far as Pharaoh was concerned, this was just another god of one of the peoples who lived in Egypt, and he rejected any claim made on behalf of that god. When Moses countered Pharaoh's response, he told him the consequences of refusing to bow to a higher god (5:3), but Pharaoh regarded such talk as 'deception' (5:9) and immediately sought to establish his own authority. From his point of view, divine authority was expressed in power over people's lives, and in the face of Moses' threats, his imposition of extra hard work on the people was a direct threat to the authority of the god of the people represented by Moses. It is also possible that Pharaoh was concerned at the growth of the Israelite people (see 5:5) who, according to earlier Pharaohs (1:8-10) might swamp the indigenous people of Egypt in the event of any enemy attack. Pharaoh wanted the people back at work.

Another oriental characteristic of life can help us understand our story, and this is the practice of bargaining. In those days it was common for people to bargain differently than now. When we bargain today, we begin with a low by realistic offer in order to begin a process of negotiation and arrive at a compromise deal. However, ancient bargaining begins with a slight, almost casual expression of interest, and the negotiations continue until a full price is agreed. The approach is different, and it explains Moses' approach to obtaining the release of the Israelites. He was being polite by asking for a three day journey to worship the Lord in the desert (5:1), for this was something nomadic groups of the day would have done as a matter of course. Pharaoh knew this well enough, and his rejection of the approach indicates that he had no intention of giving Israel even the most basic of religious freedoms; it was obvious to Pharaoh that Moses and Aaron wanted much more, and he was not willing to give anything.

This story in Exodus is a grand 'evil versus good' story, and we will find plenty of interest within it if we keep our eyes on the spiritual battle rather than the story details and the literal meaning of each part.

Going Deeper

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, but we know that the God of Israel will always have the upper hand. 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 bargaining begins!

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 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