



Exodus 4-11 (4:1-17)
 Journey to Freedom: Exodus
 “The Lord and the gods of Egypt”

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Today we continue our summer journey through Exodus. And beginning today we are going to start chewing through Exodus at a much faster rate. We just read 17 verses, but we’re really looking at chapters 4-11 today. In large part, this is because there’s a lot of repetition the rest of the way. For instance, there are the 10 plagues in chapters 7-11. There is a lot of repetition in them. And we will look at one of those repetitions today – the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. But I’m not sensing that we need a sermon on each plague (we’ve been living through one!), and we certainly don’t need 9 sermons on Pharaoh’s hard heart.

So today we kick things into a higher gear. And what I want to do today is give a bit of a summary of the events, address three tough questions that arise in these chapters, and then conclude with some practical points of application for our lives and our church.

Chapter 4 continues Moses’ conversation with God through the burning bush, that we looked at last week. **In this conversation, God is calling Moses into a new ministry: to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.** Moses goes through a litany of excuses starting in chapter 3, and continuing into today’s passage, about why he’s not the guy for the job. Now, the excuses are not made up. It’s not like he closes his eyes, puts his hands over his ears and sings “lalalalala” and pretends that he suddenly can’t see or hear God. So, he’s not being childish. In fact, I think he really felt that each of these five objections are valid reasons for why he’s not the guy for the job.

First, Moses gives the excuse that he’s not capable (3:11-12); Then he says he doesn’t know for sure which god/God he’s talking to – in other words, he doesn’t have enough knowledge of God to do the job (3:13-22). Then we get to the three we just read: he expresses concern that the Israelites won’t believe/listen to him (4:1-9); Fourth, he says that he is not eloquent: he’s slow of speech and tongue. The consensus of most scholars is that he stutters, though perhaps he was just a nervous wreck in front of groups of people (4:10-12); **And then finally, even though God has solutions to all of these,**

we get to what is the deeper truth underneath those other obstacles: that he just doesn't want to do it (4:13).

But finally, he agrees. And so, God equips him with His own presence and with his brother, Aaron, who will meet him on his way to Egypt, to help him along. Together, they will go to Pharaoh with one message on behalf of God's people. Stand and join me : "Pharaoh, Pharaoh! Oh...Let my people go! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...oh..." (repeat). eweeI doubt they sang the request to the tune of "Louie, Louie" but you never know: the words to that song (in the Kingsmen's recording of it, anyway) are so difficult to understand – other than the chorus – maybe they're actually singing in Hebrew.

Regardless, that's their request. In order to persuade him to oblige, they show displays of God's power through the plagues, which also have dire consequences for the Egyptian economy – further pressuring Pharaoh to let the people go, even though their slave labor is fueling the Egyptian economy.

Now, there are three things that arise in this narrative that raise questions for a lot of people and I want to address those so you can have greater confidence in God's Word. Perhaps there are others, but I think these three rise to the top. The first is in 4:11, where God responds to Moses' objection to go to Egypt because he is slow of speech. God replies, **"Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11).** This raises the question: Does God make people deaf, mute or blind?

The main thing being addressed here Moses' lack of faith and his hesitation to do what God commanded him to do. If we want to talk about illness, disease, disabilities, and so forth, we have to look at the whole of Scripture. And what we see most clearly is that God is a God of wholeness and healing. Sin has entered the world and there is brokenness and pain. We've all experienced that in our lives. But God's creation is good, and where it goes sideways because of sin, he comes along and makes something beautiful out of it. He give sight to the blind and freedom to the captives, as Isaiah says and Jesus applies to himself.

So here in 4:11, this isn't so much a statement about the theology of hardships; Rather, God is rebuking Moses for his lack of faith. We can allow for some hyperbole when God admonishes Moses. He first asks, "Who gave you a mouth?" Is this a theological statement that for each individual person God chose on a case-by-case basis whether to give us physical mouths or not? Obviously not. It is a rhetorical question. Similarly, God is not addressing the causes of blindness here, but the cause of Moses' unwillingness to obey God.

The second one comes from three obscure verses that probably a lot of people don't even remember. But when you read them, they're definitely head-scratchers: Exodus 4:24-26, just after where we stopped reading. Moses has just begun the journey with his family to Egypt, and here's what the next verses read: **"At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met him [presumably Moses] and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,' she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time, she said 'bridegroom of blood,' referring to circumcision.)"** (Exodus 4:24-26). What's going on here?

There's a lot of questions that come out of these verses. For instance, when it says "the Lord met him" some believe this is referring to an illness that struck Moses – maybe he got food poisoning, maybe he got coronavirus – who knows? Others, with this word "met" believe it is much more like Jacob wrestling with the angel of God. It's the same word used in verse 27 when Aaron is told to go and "meet" Moses. The word is usually used with actual personal encounters, not metaphorical ones as in God meeting him through some kind of illness.

But the point that most agree on is that Moses had not done circumcision on his sons – or at least one of them. So, Zipporah does the deed here, but seems to have some contempt toward Moses about it with her actions that follow and her statement about him (or God – hard to tell who this is directed at) being "a bridegroom of blood to me."

The reason for this event seems to be that if Moses is going to go and lead the Israelites, then he's got to be one with them as much as possible. He's not above the rules. We might wonder why he hadn't done it earlier, and perhaps it boils down to the fact that he married a Midianite woman who had different customs. Regardless, circumcision was clearly not followed, and it gets taken care of here.¹

The third difficulty in this passage is a repeating one that occurs in each of the plagues. We get the tip of the iceberg in 4:21, "The Lord said to Moses, 'When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go'" (Exodus 4:21). The last sentence is what raises the questions. So, here is a **list** of the 10 plagues and the wording around the hardening of Pharaoh's heart that accompanies each one:

- 1. Blood: Pharaoh's heart "became hard" (7:22)**
- 2. Frogs: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (8:15)**
- 3. Gnats: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (8:19)**
- 4. Flies: "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" (8:32)**
- 5. Livestock die: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (9:7)**
- 6. Boils: "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (9:12)**
- 7. Hail: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (9:34); and "hearts were hardened" (9:35)**
- 8. Locusts: God announces that he has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (10:1,10:20)**
- 9. Darkness: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (10:27)**
- 10. Death of the firstborn: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (11:10)²**

And what we see when we read through them is that in 3 instances, it simply says "Pharaoh's heart was hard/became hard" which doesn't say who made it that way; in 3 others it says "Pharaoh hardened his heart" or "he hardened his heart" but it's clear that "he" is Pharaoh. And then 4 of them say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. All four of those come in the last 5 plagues. Of the ones where it says more vaguely, "his heart was hardened," all 3 are in the first 5 plagues, along with the two that explicitly say Pharaoh hardened his heart. And in the 7th plague, the plague of hail, we are given some insight in how to understand the ones that are ambiguous about who does the hardening. In that one it explicitly says in 9:34, "Pharaoh and his officials

hardened their hearts.” In the very next verse we’re also given the more ambiguous, “hearts were hardened.” This sheds light for us on the ones that only say “his heart was hardened”: that Pharaoh does it to himself. So, the hard-heartedness starts with Pharaoh, as we see in the first 5.

In fact, in 5:2, before any of the plagues happen, Moses and Aaron initially approached Pharaoh and asked to let the Israelites have a three-day weekend worship festival out in the desert. It wasn’t even to let them leave Egypt permanently; just an old school 3-day worship revival out in the desert. It would’ve been like the Jewish version of Coachella or Burning Man or something like that. That’s all they’re asking for, and here’s the reply: **“Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord (Yahweh), that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2).** So, Pharaoh is a long way down the road of hard-heartedness all on his own.

This should come as no surprise. If you spend a lifetime far from God, immersed in pagan religiosity and believe that you yourself are a god or a demi-god...and your whole nation affirms that status...Then Yahweh is a threat. There’s going to be resistance. We see that in our own world as people who are hard-hearted toward God are really difficult to minister to in Jesus’ name – and they’re not even to the place of believing they’re a god.

To the degree that God reinforced this and hardened Pharaoh’s heart, we might wonder, how did this happen? It happened by God simply revealing who he is. **Pharaoh witnessed the power of God through Moses and Aaron and his heart became hard.** Jesus experienced that same reaction all the time. For instance, whenever he healed someone on the Sabbath, the Jewish religious leaders of the day go berserk and get their panties in a bunch. They can’t handle it. Do you think their hearts were hardened? Absolutely. In John 8:45, Jesus says, “Because I speak the truth [about God and himself, for instance] you do not believe me.” Jesus’ ministry and his teaching, which blessed many, put others on the path to crucifying him.

Here’s an illustration that might help to understand. If you take an ice cube and a piece of clay and stick them both in a hot oven: One will melt, and the

other will get dried up and hardened, even though they're both exposed to the same heat source. It's the same thing in Jesus' ministry and it's the same thing here in Exodus: Pharaoh doesn't like being shown up by the God of the Universe, and so God's activity hardens his heart, while others are drawn to God and encouraged by his display of power. It leads them to fall down in worship and adoration and to step out in faith and trust.

So, there are three points for us to consider and apply out of all of this. **First, too often we are like Moses when he made all of his excuses to God, and so the obstacle for us to overcome in our life of faith is not that we aspire to do too much with and for God, but we settle for too little.** That's not to say that like Moses, there isn't substance to our reasons why we think God has the wrong person. But maybe our obstacles, or our past (if we think our past "disqualifies" us for something), or our limitations are exactly what God will use to display is power.

So, it's worth asking ourselves: How is God working through you to touch people with the Good News of Jesus? What reasons are you giving, that God could overcome, to doing something for His Kingdom? For instance: When was the last time you brought someone to church with you (in person or online) who either wasn't already a Christian, or did not have a home church? Maybe you've said, "I don't know any non-Christians. All my friends have a home church. I'm not eloquent about my faith. I don't know enough about God. I don't know how to ask someone to come to church." I've heard all of those reasons from people in nearly 20 years as a pastor. And they're the exact kinds of things Moses said. Thank God Moses didn't let him get away with those excuses. So: are we settling for doing too little for and with God? Let's aspire to do amazing things with and for God.

Second: Only when we're certain we can't do something will we experience the grace and the power of God. Moses was pretty certain he couldn't do this job. But God, in his compassion and his grace and mercy, offered solutions and answers to every concern. God even roped in Aaron to be Moses' mouthpiece. And Moses' reluctant "Yes" was far better than Pharaoh's "No." Pharaoh never experienced the grace of God as he could have, because he kept saying "No." That's not where we want to be, right?

But how often do we say “no” just as Pharaoh did – to opportunities to minister to our neighbors, to be God’s hand of blessing in someone’s life, to serving God in our church? When we say “no” because we think we’re not qualified or don’t have the time or whatever our “weakness” may be...we miss out on the grace and the power of God. Moses’ reluctant “yes” filled with weakness was far superior to Pharaoh’s “no” filled with all his power.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that he delights in his hardships, in weakness, in insults, and the like “for when I am weak, then I am strong.” He knows that his strength is not his own, but it’s God’s. In fact, in verse 9, just before, Paul writes, “But he [Jesus] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 10:9). Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are on display and get the glory when we *can’t* do something on our own, but God works through us.

Third (and last): Is your heart being hardened or softened by God’s activity? This is the most crucial one. The other two are impacted by it. And by the way: This can be a very difficult one for pastors. When God is moving powerfully in another church, or through some other kind of ministry, it can be easy to respond with a hardened heart. Jealousy, envy, and similar thoughts and feelings can arise. A spiritually and emotionally aware pastor will take those things to the cross and leave them there and take that wider view of God’s Kingdom.

Even within an individual church there can be hardened hearts: One ministry grows while another dwindles. One ministry has energy and enthusiasm while another is lacking. What’s our heart response in those situations? Are we soft and open to what God is doing, even if it means changes we might not gravitate toward? Or do we get hard-hearted and dig in our heels...or even undermine God’s activity? Pharaoh eventually lets the people go, for instance, but then sends the military after them once they leave. He’s hard-hearted to the end, and undermines their efforts. What is our heart condition?

So, with hearts that are soft toward God, let's live into the grace and the power of God, not settling for too little of God – either personally or communally together as a church. **Instead: let's step out as Moses did, take on the ministry opportunities God offers us (even if we're hesitant) and trust God to lead us and supply us with all that we need.** Not only will we experience more of God, but much as Moses led the Israelites to freedom: we will lead others into his freeing grace as well. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/02-exodus/text/articles/allen-ex4-bloody-bsac.pdf Gives a really good discussion of this. It's scholarly, but accessible, from

² <https://bibleproject.com/blog/pharaohs-heart-grew-harder/>