



HITTING BOTTOM WHEN THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

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Exodus 5:1-6:1

Ninth Message

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Several years ago, well before I joined the staff here at PBCC, my worst work nightmare came to pass.

I had been put in charge of a large project. It was a radical departure for the company, involving millions in systems and software, a third party business relationship (radical for the company), and an innovative way of moving product around the globe.

One Friday afternoon, the systems and the operations I had helped design melted down before my very eyes. I watched computer screens as the software froze then restarted, then went haywire. I watched data disappear then reappear then disappear again. I watched us completely lose control.

As I drove home in the wee hours of Saturday morning, the situation no better at that point, I figured that I was finished. With a lump in my throat and fear in my heart, I fully anticipated being fired by the following Monday. No matter that I didn't build the systems or the software that drove them. No matter that others had made operational errors. I was in charge of the effort and my company looked to me to ensure it went well. It hadn't, and in my fear and fatigue, I thought the situation was hopeless.

I recall slamming my fist against the seat and yelling, "Why God? Why? I work so hard. I seek to be your man in all things and reflect your love and mercy. Why did you allow this to happen?"

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like you are doing all the right things, walking with God, serving him faithfully, living in his will, and yet the bottom falls out of life and your world comes crashing down?

What do you do? How do you respond? How do you go on?

Moses found himself in such a situation. Called by God to a great purpose, in chapter 5 of Exodus he finds his world hitting bottom when he thought the sky was the limit.

Moses is now in Egypt. He and Aaron have shared God's words with the people of Israel, who responded with belief and worship of God. Flushed with their success, they gain an audience with Pharaoh to make their case that the people of Israel should be released to celebrate Yahweh in the wilderness. But all does not go as Moses expects.

I. Yahweh's Demand—Moses and Aaron Confront Pharaoh (5:1-5)

And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" (Exodus 5:1 NASB)

Now that Moses and Aaron's mission has commenced, they are ready for success. Entering Pharaoh's courts, emboldened by their encounter with the Elders of Israel, they come to Pharaoh using prophetic language ("Thus says the Lord") while demanding that he release the people of Israel.

It's interesting to note that they approach Pharaoh in a manner different than that directed by God in 3:18, which we will look at in a moment. Two weeks ago, we spent time with a Moses who couldn't think of reasons fast enough why he should not go to Pharaoh. Now he comes right at him with this bold demand.

How does Pharaoh respond?

But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go." (5:2)

To use a bit of modern-day sports terminology, Moses and Aaron are rejected, fly-swatted and stuffed. Pharaoh rebuffs the command, repeating himself for emphasis. Not only does he deny the demand, he rejects the very God Israel claims to serve. But in doing so he asks the right question: "Who is Yahweh?" and provides a foretaste of what's to come. The showdown is imminent, and as Fretheim says, "This question will go ringing through the pages that follow." "The very name of Yahweh, 'I will be who I am,' promises that the identity of this God of Israel will become more fully known as events unfold, both to Israel and to Egypt."¹

So, we get a big clue as to what this season in Israel's history is all about. And now, Moses and Aaron take a different approach. They try again, this time using the language given to them by God in 3:18, presenting a much more solicitous request:

Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." (5:3)

The direct approach didn't seem to work so well. How about if we soft-sell this a little? Moses and Aaron change their method first by referring to Yahweh not by his name, but as the "God of the Hebrews." They then claim a limit to the pilgrimage of three days, and finally add an appeal to Pharaoh with the concern that disease, even death, might befall Israel if the people are not allowed to go. Surely the loss to Pharaoh would be much greater than the cost of a three-day retreat. Pharaoh responds:

But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get back to your labors!" (5:4)

In exasperation, Pharaoh addresses Moses and Aaron by name and commands them to get back to their labors, literally yelling, "get to your burdens." So far, this meeting has not gone well. And it's about to get worse.

Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!" (5:5)

Pharaoh is living with no small tension concerning the people of Israel. He needs their labor, but is concerned about

their flourishing numbers and the potential for disruption presented by this foreign people.

We see the showdown emerging: Yahweh and Pharaoh *will* go head to head. Pharaoh's concern that Israel has grown large stands in tension with God's covenant to make them a great nation.

And we are left with an important question at this juncture. Why? Why does God not grant success to Moses and Aaron in this first scene? Why must this be so difficult when it could be so easy? Do you ever find yourself asking these questions?

Before we leave this scene, I would offer one quick thought, and that is with regard to God's intentions. Yahweh fully plans to deliver his people. But we need to realize that he plans to do so in a way that leaves absolutely no doubt about who is in control. Pharaoh's question in verse 2 foreshadows the reality that there will be no question as to the hero of this story and the immensity of his power. Newly emboldened Moses and Aaron will not be the heroes. Pharaoh will not become the hero through largesse toward Israel. Neither supervisors nor foremen, nor the rank-and-file Israelite will be the heroes. God is the hero. He has called out a people and he will not be denied. But first, there's a lot of fight in Pharaoh:

II. Pharaoh's Decree—The Oppression of Israel (5:6-14)

So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying, "You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it. Because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words." (5:6-9)

Pharaoh reacts with spite, commanding that the straw needed to create quality brick not be supplied to the Israelites. Any people dreaming of pilgrimage were not working hard enough in his estimation. He's more concerned with punishing Israel than in maintaining quality production. But by doing so, Pharaoh addresses two concerns: a desperately overworked people will likely slow in their growth and also be much less able to hatch schemes that might undermine his position and plans.

So the taskmasters of the people and their foremen went out and spoke to the people, saying, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I am not going to give you any straw. You go and get straw for yourselves wherever you can find it, but none of your labor will be reduced.'" So the people scattered through all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters pressed them, saying, "Complete your work quota, your daily amount, just as when you had straw." Moreover, the foremen of the sons of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, "Why have you not completed your required amount either yesterday or today in making brick as previously?" (5:10-14)

Pharaoh's methods reveal a brutal genius. Why not just raise the quota of bricks? Verse 12 holds the key: people scattered all over cannot easily plot upheaval, much less escape. Why beat the foremen of Israel and not the people? Pharaoh turns the people on each other, breeding internal dissension and frustration. And it is rubbed in their faces as the slave

drivers adopt the prophetic language used by Moses and Aaron, "Thus says Pharaoh" (10). This is about much more than bricks, straw and a growing population of foreigners. This is a story about who is really in control; a story about who is truly God.

Now we begin to understand more of Yahweh's determination to carry out the full weight of his intentions in Egypt. Pharaoh is a brutal and unjust ruler with pretensions of deity. Yahweh will not sit still in the face of this injustice. Durham says: "This account is wonderfully written to depict a powerful Pharaoh impervious to any human challenge or plea and immovable by any force save one. Moses and Aaron are no match for him."²

So the tension mounts: what Yahweh has ordered for good has not occurred; what Pharaoh has ordered for evil has occurred. Judgment must come, but when? And how? Why does it not come now?

III. Israel Protests (5:15-21)

Then the foremen of the sons of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why do you deal this way with your servants? There is no straw given to your servants, yet they keep saying to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are being beaten; but it is the fault of your own people." But he said, "You are lazy, very lazy; therefore you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' So go now and work; for you will be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks." The foremen of the sons of Israel saw that they were in trouble because they were told, "You must not reduce your daily amount of bricks." (5:15-19)

The scene shifts back to the court of Pharaoh. The foremen of the Israelites bring their complaint. Their access to Pharaoh seems extraordinary, perhaps indicative of their importance to Pharaoh's economy as well as control of Israel.

Their complaint is just and their case stated boldly. Yet they come with humility, calling themselves "your servants" three times. This is matched by the threefold reminder that there will not be any relief in the quota of bricks demanded, raising the question, Who will Israel serve, Pharaoh or Yahweh?

The foremen, acutely aware of the injustice of the situation, go so far as to indict Pharaoh's people, though not Pharaoh himself. But in the end, as Houtman says, "it did not do anything to change Pharaoh's mind. Now it is once more driven home to them that they are a people in bondage; their lot in life is to serve Pharaoh."³

The depth of their trouble lands with resounding force. The situation is truly hopeless. This Pharaoh, with whom they have an ear, has fully rejected them. They are in desperate trouble, and they know it.

Have you ever found yourself here? Have you ever felt that your life is beyond hope, your circumstances so desperate there is no way out? Perhaps there is even a Pharaoh in your life. Maybe you report to him. Maybe he's your next-door neighbor. Maybe he's in your family or even lives in your house. You feel caught, trapped, and there is no prospect for escape.

Now we find that the foremen of Israel do what we might expect them to do.

When they left Pharaoh's presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting for them. They said to them, "May the LORD look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight and in the sight

of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us.” (5:20-21)

It's somewhat ambiguous in the Hebrew whether Moses and Aaron anxiously awaited word from the foremen or whether the foremen couldn't wait to get their hands on Moses and Aaron. Either way, there is more than a little sense of urgency here. The foremen of Israel encounter Moses and Aaron, who are devastated not just by the news of Pharaoh's resistance, but also the verbal blows of their own people.

1) They are cursed: “may the Lord...judge you”(21). The foremen call upon God to “look into what these two had been up to and to hold them responsible.”⁴

2) They are accused of destroying Israel's reputation: they equate themselves to stinking, rotting fish or animal flesh.

3) Finally, and perhaps most devastating of all, they accuse Moses and Aaron of giving Pharaoh reason to destroy the people of Israel.

This scene would make a fine Southwest Airlines ad featuring Moses: “Wanna get away?” Moses and Aaron are so destroyed that they have no voice in reply. One can imagine them slinking or perhaps fleeing from a near lynch-mob scene.

It's not surprising then that Moses approaches God and has a few words to share.

IV. Moses' Case Against God (5:22-6:1)

Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, “O LORD, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all.” (5:22-23)

In response to the case against him, Moses goes before the Lord with a case against Yahweh. Note that there is no sign of Aaron. It seems that Moses is fully alone now, laid bare before his God. He has hit absolute rock bottom. Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. He is defeated, disillusioned and disenfranchised. Even worse, Pharaoh seems stronger than ever, and Yahweh seems to have failed in his mission to deliver his people.

So Moses brings his case to God with two questions and two parallel accusations:

1) Why have you brought trouble?

2) Why did you send me? (You can almost hear him, “I told you this would not work.”)

3) This has brought nothing but trouble from Pharaoh.

4) You have not brought deliverance at all. God, you've not done what you said.

Can you believe this? Can you believe how bold Moses is? He gets right in God's face! If I'm standing next to Moses, I'm stepping aside to stay away from that lightning bolt!

But there is no lightning bolt, only reassurance from Yahweh. So he responds:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he will let them go, and under compulsion he will drive them out of his land.” (6:1)

Yahweh gives Moses a simple reminder of assurance. “My turn now,” says the Lord. “Not for reason of your efforts, nor Aaron's, not by the efforts of the foremen, not by any change of heart of Pharaoh, but by my hand you will be delivered.

Not only that, because of my mighty hand he will actually drive the people out. You will know, Pharaoh will know, all Egypt will know, Israel will know that I AM the LORD.” So gradually we are understanding more of what God is up to here, and we will continue to unpack it in the coming weeks.

For now, however, we need to stop and ask: What do we do when we have done the right things and yet life hits right back with difficulty and pain?

How do we respond when we have walked faithfully with God but life plunges us to a rock bottom place?

Why do these things happen?

V. Reflections

This text has some profound gems of truth for us.

A. Response: Pour out your heart with bold, brutal honesty

What is your response in time of trouble? Somewhere along the way, we in Western evangelical Christianity got the idea that in the midst of trial we are to put on a smiley façade, all fresh scrubbed and shiny in the face of tragedy and pain. We must get over it. It's time for us to be honest with God, brutally honest. He's a big God! He can take it. He longs for us to pour out our hearts to him.

Many scholars have struggled with Moses' honesty before God. Some have gone so far as to change language to soften Moses' approach. What a shame.

Do you read the Psalms? Have you ever read Lamentations? Have you ever spent time in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus? Life is tough. Through the Scriptures, God not only gives us the freedom to approach him boldly with our pain and disappointment, but he even gives us the language to do it when our own words fail. What a gift!

B. Move on: From the notion that if we live well enough, circumstances will always be good

The “health and wealth” gospel has invaded Western Christianity. Many of us have picked up the notion that if we do things just right, say the right things, dress the right way, support the right causes, attend the right church, give just enough, educate our kids just right, vote for the right candidates, that a just-right life will follow.

God in his grace indeed gives us much for which to be very grateful. And please note, I am NOT talking about situations of abuse and violence in which you or another MUST be moved to safety. But we must be reminded that God in general is not interested in changing our circumstances anywhere near as much as he is interested in changing our hearts.

Why doesn't God just get Israel out of there right away? Because he's got great work to do. He has plans for Moses, for Aaron, for his people, for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians. There is justice to be meted out. There are lives to be changed. There are hearts to be seared with the knowledge and presence of the living God.

He's got great work to do in your life. Stop trying to change or anesthetize your circumstances and start being honest with your Lord. Jesus could have fled. Jesus could have rearranged his circumstances in a heartbeat. Instead he poured out his heart to the Father in the Garden then set his face resolutely, like a flint, on the cross set before him. Thank you, Jesus.

C. Dream: Dare to dream about your glorious future

The text from Revelation that we read earlier (Rev 21:1-7) is to remind us of our glorious future. Life is not unlike child-

birth. Terrible contractions and pain invade our lives like a woman giving birth. But the struggles of labor beget new life.

Through Egypt, God was birthing a new nation, a people for himself. I've got great news for you: He is *still* birthing that nation, and all of you who embrace the good news of Jesus Christ are a part of that nation. When the painful realities of life wrack your soul, remember your future and the Almighty God who has given it to you.

D. Look: For heaven meeting earth

God's presence is all that we need. His presence is heaven enough.

That weekend years ago, when my business operation melted down, God sent two angels to care for me; two friends that Sunday, right here at PBCC. They wept with me, they prayed with me, they attended my heart and soul. I tasted heaven through these two men that day, the day before I thought my career was to end. Most amazing of all, I did not know until later that they had never even met each other prior to that day. Yet God used them as a team to bring heaven to earth. And I didn't lose my job. We fixed the meltdown instead.

A little over two months ago, the bottom fell out of my world again. I lost my dad to cancer. He was a believer and he didn't seem to fear dying. But I prayed for more. I prayed that God would give him a glimpse into heaven, that he would actually anticipate with joy his glorious future.

I don't know if my dad ever experienced that glimpse, but I do know that on February 25, 2004, heaven met earth in room 191 of the Brighton Gardens Nursing Facility.

It was early in the afternoon, and after a morning visit with my dad, I took my mom home for some rest. I left her to go get a cup of coffee and be alone with the Lord. After a short time, though, I grew restless and was compelled to go back to be with my dad. His eyes had clouded over, his breathing grew labored and his ability to respond was all but gone.

When I signed in at the nursing facility, I noticed that a man by the name of Jim Evans had signed in just ahead of me to visit my dad. I had no idea who Jim Evans was.

I entered my dad's room to find a lanky, grey haired gentleman of eighty years at my dad's beside. We introduced ourselves and I asked Jim if he'd like some time alone with my dad. He said no, he just wanted to say a few things and then he'd be on his way. So I sat down, having no idea that heaven had just invaded the room in the form of this gentleman.

He leaned over my dad's bed and took his hand. Holding his face close to my father's, he looked him straight in the eyes. For the very last time, my dad's eyes focused, locking on to the eyes of this fellow WWII veteran.

Jim spoke. In a loud, clear voice he said, "I love you, John. You're going home soon. And I'm not far behind. I love you, John."

Perhaps that was the moment my dad glimpsed heaven. It certainly was for me.

I've tried to capture the essence of that moment in a poem. It alludes to Jacob when he was fleeing from his angry brother Esau. In the wilderness, he met God. I call this,

Room 191

Jacob on the run, exhausted in a certain place, a no place
Stones for his head, a restless night of fear and doubt
Visions of heaven break in; the hand of God renders a
promise

"I am with you, I will watch over you, I will not leave you"
How awesome is this place! This no place is none other
than the house of God,

The gate of heaven.

Room 191, a no place. A man exhausted, life ebbing away

His pillow like a stone, his body finds no rest

A messenger from God arrives, his eyes gentle, his face
wise

"I am here, I love you. You're going to heaven soon, and I
am not far behind"

Room 191, how awesome is this place! This no place is
none other than the house of God.

Without the pain of life we wouldn't long for heaven. It's in the midst of life's pain that heaven meets earth. When we flee the pain, we miss glimpses of heaven.

1. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 86.

2. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 65.

3. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok, 1993), 478.

4. Houtman, *Exodus*, 482.

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