

# GOD IS KEEPING HIS PROMISES TO PEOPLE OF FAITH

## Exodus 4: 18-31

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

### INTRODUCTION

Think about a recent decision you made. Why did you decide what you decided? What were the promises (benefits) you believed would come to you as a result of this decision?

Faith is not some blind leap into the dark, hoping against hope that someone or something will catch us. Faith is not believing something is true even when you have no evidence to support your belief. Faith is not positive thinking. It's not believing something will happen as long as I don't have any negative thoughts or doubts or verbally question it is going to happen. Rather, faith is ordering our lives based upon our confidence in and love for the promises held out to us by people and things. We all know that the Christian life is to be lived by faith. Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:7 he says, "We live by faith, not by sight." God's conversation with Moses at the foot of Mt. Horeb, as recorded in Exodus 3 & 4 has been a discussion about the trustworthiness of God and the value of his salvation. Moses has been giving God reasons why he can't trust the promises God is making. God has been seeking to persuade Moses that he is trustworthy and what he is promising is better than everything Moses has or can ever hope to obtain on his own.

Surprisingly, in 4:18, we find Moses asking his father-in-law for permission to return to Egypt to find out what has happened to his brothers, the nation of Israel. During the several days it took Moses to travel from Mt. Horeb with his sheep back to Midian, he began to trust in the promises of God. He began to believe that God was able to do all he promised and that what God was promising was better than life as a shepherd in Midian. At least he "sort of" believed.

What we are going to see in this passage is how it is that God gives faith to Moses and how he sustains his faith.

### STUDY

1. What are some of the "costs" to Moses and his family (including Jethro) for his decision to return to Egypt? How does this show his faith?

*His father-in-law has depended upon him and so Moses knows that his leaving will mean greater hardship for Jethro. It will mean the loss of income for himself. You'll notice that unlike Jacob's return from Paddan-Aram as a wealthy man, Moses has one donkey to his name. In addition, he is going to take away Jethro's daughter and his grandsons. This trip back to Egypt is going to split up the family. Moses is leaving a good life that he knows to go into a very difficult situation. The only way he can do this is if he believes that God will take care of him and if he believes the benefits of getting involved in God's salvation will outweigh the known benefits of working for and living with Jethro.*

2. What evidence is there in v. 18 that his faith is not what it ought to be? Why does he say this?

*While Moses has faith; he is going to return to Egypt, just like God told him to do; yet his faith is not very strong. He doesn't tell Jethro why he is returning to Egypt. The reason he gives is so that he can see if any of his brothers are still alive. He gives Jethro a very human reason for returning. Why does he do this? There are at least two reasons. First, he is afraid of what Jethro would think if he told him that God appeared to him in a burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. He was embarrassed by the gospel. He doesn't want to look foolish in the eyes of his father-in-law. Second, I think it is more than possible that this is at least part of the reason he is returning, at this point. It's like he's hedging his bets. "I'll go back to Egypt because I haven't seen my relatives for forty years. I'd like my wife and children to meet them and I'll see how they're getting along. I can't imagine*

that I'll be able to do anything to help them, but at least I'll pay them a visit. Even if nothing comes of this "leading Israel out of slavery" business, I'll at least see my relatives."

3. What does God tell him as soon as he decides to return to Egypt? Why does God tell him this?

*He tells Moses that those who were seeking his life are dead. In other words, there is no reason to be afraid that when he gets back to Egypt he will immediately be arrested and killed. God gives him information so he will continue to live by faith. He assures him that he won't be harmed. This is knowledge that only God could have and is an expression of his kindness to Moses.*

4. What four things does God tell Moses while he is on the way (vv.21-23) that emphasizes God's gracious control over everything that is happening?

1. *God gives the miracles that Moses will perform to him.*
2. *Pharaoh's rejection of Moses' request to release Israel from slavery is God's will. In fact, he is going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that when Moses tells Pharaoh that God wants him to let the people to go, Pharaoh will refuse.*
3. *Israel is God's firstborn son*
4. *God will punish Pharaoh for refusing to let the people go by killing his firstborn son.*

5. How do Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 2:14 say about every Christian something similar to what v. 21 says about Moses and the miracles?

*These are miracles that God has given Moses to do. Moses doesn't have the power, God does. Even in the command to go to Pharaoh is the reminder that it is his gracious power that will accomplish the work. The miracles are God's miracles. He is to make sure that he does all of the miracles that God has given him to do. This is just like us. The life of faith we are called to live is a life that is given and sustained by God himself. We are doing the good works that he prepared in advance. We are God's people and we are eager to do*

*good because of Christ's redeeming work. Just as God gave Moses the miracles that he performed so he has given us the life we are to live.*

6. What problems do vv. 21b-23 contain? What questions do they raise?

*First, is God schizophrenic? He told Moses that the reason he is sending him to Egypt is to bring Israel out of their slavery to Pharaoh. Moses is going to tell Pharaoh repeatedly that the Lord commands him to "Let my people go." He even says it right in this verse. Yet, God tells Moses that he is going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he won't obey his command. So does God want Israel to leave or not? A second problem is the whole issue of human freedom and accountability. If God is going to harden Pharaoh's heart then how can he be a free moral creature? How can it be just for God to punish Pharaoh by killing his firstborn son for not letting Israel go, when he is the one who hardened his heart so that he wouldn't let them go?*

7. What conclusions can we draw about God's will and man's will from these verses? Without drawing upon human logic or other passages to help us, what does this passage tell us about the relationship between God's power, human will and human accountability?

*God is sovereign over human hearts. He is able to harden people's hearts whenever he wants. The result of God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is that he will refuse to let Israel go. Pharaoh is guilty of disobeying God when he refuses to let Israel go and so God will justly punish him by killing his firstborn son. God is able to do something that no human can do. He is able to harden a human's heart so that the human behaves contrary to his will in such a way that God is not guilty of evil but the human is guilty of doing evil and thus liable to God's just punishment. While that doesn't fit with our ideas of human freedom or of justice we know that it is fair because God "always does what is right" (Genesis 18:25). This passage does not say that God will "permit" Pharaoh to harden his own*

heart. Rather it says God hardens Pharaoh's heart. God is active, not passive. There is a mystery here. God is so great that he is able to ordain that men do evil in such a way that he is not guilty of evil, men are. God is sovereign over everything, including the evil choices of evil men so that all things serve his good purposes. And men are guilty for the evil they do. No human can ever accuse God of making them do evil. Every human being, including Pharaoh, does evil because they want to do evil and therefore are guilty before God and deserve his punishment. Pharaoh deserves to have his firstborn son killed for the evil he does to God's firstborn son. However, God's plan for the salvation of Israel includes Pharaoh's hard heart.

**8. Why does God tell Moses this?**

*He wants him to know this so that when Pharaoh resists God's will Moses will not think that Pharaoh is stronger than God. He wants Moses to persist in faith and so he assures him that even the evil of Pharaoh is under God's control. Moses should not be deterred when things don't go as he hopes because God is in charge. He is working out all things, including the evil of Pharaoh, for the good of his people. God wants Moses to be consumed with a vision of his sovereign grace, so he will persevere in his faith. Everything God has commanded, he can accomplish, because the all sovereign God who even rules over Pharaoh's heart is with him. The knowledge that God hardens Pharaoh's heart is not a reason for Moses to be passive. Rather, it is an incentive to persist in doing the work of God.*

**9.** How does it help you to know that the evil that is done to you by others is under God's sovereign control?

**10.** How is God's calling Israel his "firstborn" son an evidence of his sovereign grace? (See Genesis 25:19-23 & Romans 9:10-13)

*If you will remember, Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, is not the firstborn son of Isaac. Esau is the firstborn son, not Jacob. Yet God chose Jacob/Israel to receive the rights and privileges of the*

*firstborn. Thus it is that Paul writes, "...before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose in election might stand, not by works but by him who calls, she (Rebekah) was told, 'the older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" Israel is the firstborn by grace, not by any other means. Additionally, when God tells Pharaoh that Israel is his firstborn son he is saying that out of all the nations on the earth, he has chosen Israel to be preeminent. The nation of Israel is God's chosen people, not due to anything in them but due only to God's gracious decision to save them and make them his people. God doesn't save people because we are valuable, obedient or faithful. He saves people because he delights to treat sinners kindly. He saves according to his purpose and will, not according to anything in us.*

**11.** How does God's sovereignty over all things help you to trust him?

**12.** How will you apply this knowledge to something that is happening in your life right now?

**God gives us faith and strengthens our faith by reminding us of his sovereign grace.**

**13.** Why does God try to kill Moses? See Genesis 17: 1-14.

*In vv. 1-8 God restates his covenant with Abraham. He promises that he will make Abraham into a great nation, that he will be their God and they will be his people. He promises to give them the land of Canaan. Then in vv. 9-14, God gives to Abraham circumcision as the sign of the covenant. He is to circumcise every male born into his family when they are eight days old. It is the physical sign that the descendants of Abraham are God's people. As Paul says in Romans 4 circumcision is the sign of the righteousness that Abraham received by faith. It bears witness to the fact that God has, by grace, chosen Israel. Don't miss this, the Jewish people were to circumcise their boys, not to make them part of God's people but as the sign they were God's people. Circumcision is done by faith. It is the human*

response to God's making a covenant with them. In v. 14 God tells Abraham that anyone who is not circumcised will be cut off from the people of God. The reason? They show by their unwillingness to be circumcised that they do not believe that God is worthy of their trust. They spurn God's grace. Obviously, Moses had failed to circumcise at least one of his sons. He had made a decision to not obey God. He deserved to die for his disobedience and so God came to kill him.

**14.** Based on Zipporah's response, why did Moses fail to circumcise his son?

Based upon Zipporah's action and her words I think it is very safe to assume that the reason this son was not circumcised is due to the disapproval of his wife. For some reason, Zipporah did not want her son to be circumcised. We are not told why. Most likely it had something to do with her religious or cultural biases. Moses, out of fear of his wife and a preference for domestic harmony did not obey God and have his son circumcised. Moses believed the favor of his wife was a superior pleasure to the favor of God. As Calvin says in his commentary, "...for the sake of the favor of men he neglected to obey God." Being "worn out by domestic quarrels, he at last departed from his duty." Here is another evidence of the weakness of Moses' faith. He is not in any shape to lead out the people of Israel. He valued his wife's opinion more than belonging to the people of God. He feared and obeyed his wife rather than fearing and obeying God.

**15.** Why does God pick this time to kill Moses?

There are at least two reasons. First, Moses is on his way to lead the people of Israel out of slavery to Mt. Horeb to worship God. How can he lead anyone to do what he is refusing to do? He is not worshipping God but his wife's approval. Therefore, this is the moment of crisis for Moses. If he doesn't obey, then he will be killed and God will find someone else. God doesn't need Moses. Moses needs God. So God attacks him to force him to choose. Second, I think that this is God's work of converting Zipporah as well. She is away from the support of her pagan family. There is no one else

around to turn to for support. She must decide if she will love her husband or her extended family and its religious preferences. God forces her hand and so she at least submits to God in action. Her heart will be dealt with at a later time.

**16.** What do these verses have to say to us?

First, God will have no competitors and so he sends all manner of suffering into the lives of his children so that we will love, trust and fear him alone. A desire for the approval of human beings is the cause of much sin in our lives. The fear of man is a trap. God is determined to drive the fear of man out of us, so he sends suffering to us. In Moses' case, the suffering came as the direct result of his sin. This is not always the case in the life of the Christian. As we have seen in numerous other passages, God sends suffering, even to his obedient children in order to purify our faith and teach us to love God more than we love anything else on earth. However, sometimes, the suffering God sends to us is due to our disobedience. He is seeking to get us to stop disobeying him and to get us to obey him. He does this out of his love for us.

Second, Jesus did not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household. There are times in our lives when obedience to Jesus will require that we disappoint our parents, spouses or children. Obedience to the commands of God is the evidence that we prefer God to all other pleasures. God uses suffering to help us to see that he is better than the pleasures of sin and of this world. His approval matters infinitely more than the approval of others.

**17.** What are some ways you struggle with fearing men (wanting the approval of men) more than fearing God (wanting the approval of God)?

**18.** What are some ways God has sent suffering to you to get you to love him and not the approval of men or some other sinful pleasure?

**God gives us faith and strengthens our faith by sending suffering to purify our faith.**