

GOD IS KEEPING HIS PROMISES BY MAKING THINGS WORSE

Exodus 5:1-23

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new after worship service this week?

INTRODUCTION

Describe a time when you felt you did the “right thing” but a “bad thing” happened to you either as a direct result or not as a result but coincidentally, shortly afterwards. How did that make you feel?

In spite of what many TV preachers and numerous churches in our own town will tell you, there is no promise from God that if you do the right thing, good things will happen to you on earth. In fact, the Bible tells us to expect the very opposite. As Jesus said to his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble.” Or as Peter says, “Don’t be surprised brothers by the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.” We have in our passage today one of the clearest descriptions in the Bible of this fact, when you do the right thing, bad things often happen to you.

However, this passage is not merely a pessimistic story of how bad things happen to good people. We are in the midst of the story of God’s delivering his people out of the misery of their slavery in Egypt. In chapters 3 and 4, God told Moses that he was going to deliver Israel out of their slavery through him. He told Moses that Pharaoh’s heart would be hard, he would resist obeying the command to set Israel free. He told Moses that it was his will that Pharaoh’s heart be hard. He told Moses that he was going to overcome Pharaoh’s resistance through performing many miracles at the hand of Moses and Aaron. He has told Moses to expect trouble and that the trouble that comes is according to his will, even while he is not the author of evil. What we see in this chapter is so important for us to know and believe. When God is in the business of saving people, he makes things worse before

he makes them better for reasons. God has reasons for why things are not going well, even though you have decided to obey him.

STUDY

1. According to v. 1, what gives God the right to demand that Pharaoh let Israel go free?

The people of Israel are God’s people. God himself called these descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob out of the idolatrous, pagan culture of Ur. They did not seek him. He sought them. God chose them by his grace and he has entered into a covenant with them to be their God and to care for them. They belong to him, not to Pharaoh or Egypt. God’s demand that Pharaoh release Israel is very much like a civil suit between humans. Imagine that Randy Benish lends me his truck to take a load of stuff to the dump but after I return I park it in my driveway and keep the keys. When he comes over to get his truck from me I tell him, no, I like the truck and have decided to keep it for myself. What will he do? He will go to court and prove that it is his truck and the judge will require that I give it back. That is what God is doing here. He sent his people into Egypt to preserve them and the Egyptians during a time of famine. Now he wants his people back. Pharaoh has no right to hold them and use them for his own purposes. They belong to God, not Pharaoh.

But also notice the justice of the purpose for which he wants them back. He wants them back so that they can hold a festival to God in the desert. That word festival is used all over the OT and refers to regular gatherings of God’s people to remember him and his salvation and to worship him for his salvation. This is why God makes people and why he saves people. We were made to be more impressed with God than we are with everyone and everything else. We were made to rejoice in him. We were made to seek all our happiness in him and through him and for him. This is true of all humans but especially this is the case for those whom God has saved. He saves his people for the express purpose of our finding our joy in him and expressing it in our giving him our entire lives. Nothing is more just than God’s requiring that his people worship him.

2. Jesus said the greatest command was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.” Paul told the Athenians that God commands all men everywhere to repent of their false religions and trust in Christ alone. Is it just for God to command all men everywhere to love him and trust in Christ alone? Why or why not? (See Romans 1:18-23, Acts 17:24-26, Hebrews 10:28-31, Rev. 5:9-14)

It is just for God to require we love him and trust Christ because he made us and gives us every breath we take and every pleasure we experience. It is just because he made us for the purpose of loving him. It is just because he has sent Christ to redeem sinners. Christ alone is worthy of all honor and praise.

3. What are the ways that Pharaoh’s wickedness is revealed in vv. 2-14?

First, Moses and Aaron are not asking anything for themselves. In fact, as I mentioned, their request is a request for God to be glorified as he is due, not a request for Israel to escape their suffering. They do not begin by requesting that Pharaoh let the people go permanently. Rather they make a very small, very reasonable request. Pharaoh has enjoyed the labor of these slaves his whole life yet he is unwilling to even let them go for three days to offer worship to the true God of heaven and earth.

Second, notice at the end of v. 3 that Moses and Aaron tell Pharaoh that if Israel doesn’t go worship God, then God will punish them, Israel, with a plague and the sword. Pharaoh’s refusal shows his indifference to the suffering of other humans. He doesn’t care that he is exposing Israel to God’s vengeance. Additionally, he shows that he is callous to the well-being of his own people as well. There is an implied threat in this statement by Moses. If God will punish the people of Israel for not worshipping him when they are being held against their will, how will he treat those who are preventing Israel from worshipping God? Pharaoh shows that he doesn’t even care about his own people.

Third, Pharaoh declares that the God who made him and who has given him everything he has, is a nothing and a nobody. In essence he is declaring his preference for the idols of Egypt and rejecting the only true and living God. Although Pharaoh does know the Lord, he neither glorifies him as Lord, nor gives thanks to him. He claims to be wise and yet he has become a fool by worshipping idols rather than the living and true God.

Fourth, he falsely accuses Israel. The people have faithfully served the Egyptians for centuries. They are not asking for a break for themselves but so they can worship God. Yet, Pharaoh calls into question their motives and their work habits. He accuses them of being lazy and hypocritical. Fifth, he cruelly increases their work. He commands that they gather the straw that they must use to make bricks, yet they cannot reduce the number of bricks that they make. He requires them to do twice the labor in the same amount of time. The reason he does this is to make the people forget God (v.9). His ambition is to make Israel forget the promises of God and to lose all hope. He aims to turn the people of God against God.

Sixth, he calls God’s word a lie. At the end of v. 9 he calls the promises of God to care for his people and to deliver them from their slavery a deception. Seventh, he beats the Hebrew foremen for not producing their quotas of bricks. He punishes people for not doing what is impossible to do. He seeks to intimidate the people through force and brutality. Finally, he aims to divide God’s people. He wants to set the people of God against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. He is out to destroy the people of God in every possible way that he can. Again, he is doing this out of spite for the Lord, not because God has ever done anything to him. The Lord has only given him everything he has ever enjoyed and yet he delights to abuse the people who belong to God. He has no reason to hate God or God’s people, yet he hates them.

4. Does Pharaoh deserve to have his nation destroyed and his firstborn son killed (4:22-23)? Why or why not?

What we are seeing here in Pharaoh’s complete disregard for God and his people is how right it will be for God to destroy Egypt. The

wickedness of Pharaoh calls for God's just retribution upon him. He has no reason to reject God's just claim and yet he not only rejects it but uses God's claim as an excuse to increase the misery of God's people. He aims to get God's people to curse God. He seeks to turn them against their maker and redeemer. Therefore, it will be right for God to utterly destroy his nation.

5. Are you ever surprised by how much evil there is in the world? Why or why not?

6. In Romans 1:18-32 we are told three times that God, in response to humankind's refusal to glorify him or give thanks to him (v. 21) and because we worship created things rather than the Creator (vv. 23 & 25), "gives men over—to the sinful desires of their hearts" (v. 24), "to shameful lusts" (v. 26) and "to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done" (v. 28). Why does God do this? (See vv. 18-20, 2 Thess. 1:6-10 & Jeremiah 13:22-25)

It is God's will that evil increases on the earth. God doesn't do evil but he gives people over to their evil desires so evil increases on earth. One of the reasons is so that the justice of God in sending people to hell will be clearly revealed. God gives people over to their sinful desires so it will be empirically verifiable that people deserve to go to hell, just like it is obvious that Pharaoh deserves what he gets. It is one of the reasons he permits his people to be persecuted through the ages. When people mock and persecute the people of God for no other reason than we are the people of God they are simply storing up wrath against themselves. It will be obvious in the final judgment that all who are sent to hell deserve to be sent to hell. This is one of God's purposes is ordaining the existence of evil in the world. As Jonathon Edwards said, "God is glorified in the damnation of sinners."

7. How does it make you feel to know one reason evil exists is to show God's glory in condemning sinners to hell?

God makes things worse before he makes them better in order to display his justice.

8. How do the Hebrew foremen feel after they petition Pharaoh to relieve their suffering and discover that he is the cause of their suffering (v. 19)?

The foremen knew they were in trouble. It was after exhausting this final court of human appeal that they realize that they are doomed. There is no way they can make the required bricks and so they are going to be continually beaten. Here is a truly hopeless situation. There is no way out. They are slaves and they have no other course of action than working like mad to meet the quota and then being beat up when they don't meet it, which is inevitable. Life was bad before but now it is really bad. It really cannot get any worse than this. All hope is gone. There are no other human solutions. They are completely at the mercy of a brutal tyrant without any expectation of relief.

9. Why does God place his people in such hopeless conditions (See Psalm 119:71-72, 2 Corinthians 1:9, Hebrews 12:10, 1 Peter 1:7)

What God has done to these people is something he regularly does to all his people. He places us in utterly helpless and hopeless conditions so that he can display the greatness of his power in our salvation. The fact is that we all are always as helpless as these Hebrew slaves, but we rarely feel the depth of it. There are times in our lives when God especially reveals our helplessness. There are many ways that he does this. He might use lack of money or a conflicted relationship. He might use an accident or a disease. He might use the betrayal of a friend or failing grades. He might even use a besetting sin to teach us how powerless we are in ourselves. He might use failure in our job or in a ministry assignment he has given us to show us that there is no human way out. Either God must act or we are lost. The point of this work of God is always the same: to show us that our salvation is not dependent upon us. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. It truly is a miracle when anyone makes it to heaven. Going to heaven requires the omnipotent power of God for we are a helpless, powerless people.

10. What are some ways God has made plain to you that you are helpless without Christ?

God makes things worse before he makes them better in order to display his power.

11. What does their response to Moses and Aaron tell us about them and their view of God (vv. 20-21)? (Compare with 4:29-31)

The moment they lay eyes upon Moses and Aaron they begin to curse them. They blame Moses and Aaron for their trouble. In blaming them, they also blame God because Moses and Aaron are doing what God told them to do. They declare that God will judge Moses for what he has done. In short, they are telling Moses to go to hell. When they say, “May God look upon you and judge you,” what is it that they want God to judge Moses for doing? They want God to judge Moses for doing what God told him to do. They accuse Moses of making their life miserable by his doing the will of God. Only a few days before they “believed” that the Lord had appeared to Moses and that he had sent them to deliver Israel from their slavery. Only days earlier they were worshipping God for remembering them and looking upon them with favor. But now, due to this suffering, they are cursing Moses and the God who sent him. They declare that God wants to harm them, not save them.

Remember, in 4:30, Aaron told them all the words the Lord told Moses. Some of those words the Lord told Moses were the warning that Pharaoh was going to have a hard heart and resist God’s demand to set them free. God told them to expect this kind of trouble. However, they reveal, at the beginning of God’s saving work that they are not interested in God and his salvation but in living a comfortable life on earth. They know how God ought to save them and this is not how it should be done. Rather than patiently bearing the suffering and hoping in God, they blame God’s prophet and sink into despair. They show by their cursing of Moses and blaming of God that they are a people without faith. God does not save these people or any people because they are worthy of being saved but because of his free decision to save. He saves by grace, not by works.

12. How does Moses respond to the suffering of the Hebrews and the rebuke of the Hebrew foremen?

Not only do the people have no faith but Moses has no faith. He immediately turns to the Lord and wants to turn in his prophet badge. He immediately asks the age-old question that proud and rebellious humans always ask, “Why God, did you let this happen?” “It’s your fault we are in trouble here. It’s your fault I’m being treated with such disrespect. You are a weak and impotent God who cannot keep his promises. You don’t really love us. You are out to harm us. You are faithless and untrustworthy. You sent me on a fool’s errand and I don’t like it one bit. You promise salvation and give misery.” This is how Moses speaks to the God of the universe.

13. What do we discover about God’s purposes in this suffering by seeing the response of the Hebrew foremen and Moses?

God is saving this people, this prophet, not because of righteous deeds they have performed but according to his grace and mercy. He is saving a people who does not trust him, nor respect him. Their failure to trust God does not turn God back from saving them. We see in their rebellion the grace of God shining through. Salvation is a gift from God to sinners who deserve hell. This is a fundamental fact of our life with God.

14. When are you most surprised by the fact that God has killed his son for your sins and has not “given you over to shameful lusts” but has “caused you to be born again into a living hope”?

15. Do you often think about how much you deserve hell? Why or why not?

God makes things worse before he makes them better in order to display his grace.