

TESTED

Exodus 4:18–7:7

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The text today will speak to your heart if you've ever experienced tremendous reversal or attacks at the precise time you thought you were moving in obedience to God's will; or if you felt the contempt of your family for your obedience to God; or you have folded at the precise moment when you should have been strong; or if you've had everything go wrong, so wrong that you sank into deep depression and attributed the evil that was happening to you to God. And to make matters worse, God refuses to explain the reason for your reversal. Or if you've ever been ordered by the Lord to get back up on your feet after being defeated and to be more courageous in standing up again than you ever were before, that's the kind of thing that we're facing today. The theme of this particular session is testing. In four different ways Moses is being tested. He's tested by his return to Egypt. He's tested by his encounter with Pharaoh. He's tested by having to face unexpected reverses. And he's tested by impossible orders.

I. Tested in returning to Egypt is the theme of 4:18–31.

The first part of that is his departure from Midian where he goes to his father-in-law and indicates that he wants to go back and see if his kinsmen are still alive in Egypt. This is an understatement to Jethro his father-in-law of his real purpose in going. He does not indicate anything at all about the experience he's just had at Mount Horeb and the burning bush and God speaking to him and giving him the revelation of "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." He simply passes over the revelation that God has made to him and speaks of to a self-motivated desire to go back and see his family. It may be that Jethro was not ready to receive whatever revelation Moses at this particular point could have given. It may have been that often persons

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have difficulty in speaking of God and talk more freely of just human emotions. It may be here that Moses simply cannot bring himself to speak to the first person he would have spoken to about his experience with God at Sinai.

He receives permission from Jethro and blessing for him to take his wife and two sons. He wants his family to experience God's deliverance. He's taking a lot of risks here as a husband and a father to take his family and bring them into the very place where his kinsmen, the Hebrews, were in slavery. So when he takes his family with him, he is demonstrating a faith in God that indeed God had called him and would bring him out. Moses is seen as acting in obedience to God's instructions by going to Egypt. We do not know if Moses had other revelations on the way, in verses 21–23, where the Lord reinstitutes His promise to him. No doubt there were some days and weeks where Moses simply had to act in obedience to the revelation given to him on Mount Sinai. The Lord did not repeat every day of his life the burning bush experience. It is the same with us. The Lord gives us great dramatic experiences sometimes where we have a spiritual breakthrough; then we may go for a period of time after that where we must simply walk in obedience to that which we have already experienced.

Moses goes into Egypt with a naked face. He has no army with him to lead the Hebrews out. He has no military hardware. He in his hand he goes with what is called "the staff [or "rod"] of God" (Exodus 4:20). This was a shepherd's staff or stick. With that rod of God he will do these things. This rod will be transformed to a serpent before Pharaoh's eyes; he will smite the Nile and water will turn to blood. He will lift his rod, the rod of God, and a plague of frogs will break upon the land. He will lift the rod again and a plague of gnats or flies will break upon the land. He will lift the rod once more and there will be a plague of hail. Again he will lift the rod and there will be a plague of locusts. He will lift the rod once more when the Red Sea stands before them and the

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waters will be smitten and part on either side. When the children of Israel are in the wilderness he will smite the rock at Horeb and water will flow from the rock. When they are in battle with the Amalekites, one of the first battles which they fight, he will go up onto a mountain and he will lift his rod. And as long as the rod is in the air, victory will be given to the people of Israel. All of these are occasions in which the rod of God is noted in the text of Exodus. Strikingly, however, the last mission of Moses' rod of God, which will occur some two years after this event—which will bring some forty years of wandering for Moses himself—is when he at the waters of Meribah is told to speak to the rock and from it would come forth water. Instead, he smites the rock with his rod. He smites it twice and the Lord rebukes him and forbids him from entering the Promised Land. That shows that the rod in Moses' hands was an instrument of God, but gradually, because that rod had done such wonders, Moses perhaps began to place his faith in the rod rather than in God. He comes to a point later in his life where his obedience to God is laid aside because the instrument that is in his hand seems to be so powerful. How subtle a spiritual temptation it is to use a technique or method which God has given, and over and over it has worked in our lives; we have seen God use it. Then to begin to misplace trust and put it in the rod or the technique rather than in God himself. These are times of stress and Moses is moving into Egypt with that rod which had so much potential in it.

As he was going along to Egypt, God reminds him in Exodus 4:21–23 that he is to put before Pharaoh miracles. In the Scriptures, words are used for miracles and signs. “Miracles” are those things that cause us to simply open our mouth in awe. But “signs” are miracles which have meaning. We read into the miracle a window that is a window to God's character. It shows us something about God's divine nature. The word “miracle” is used in regard to Pharaoh. The word “sign” is never connected with it, for Pharaoh does not see the miracles into the nature of

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God. He simply sees them as great events. But for the children of Israel, it can be described both as miracles and signs. Indeed, in this day, when we see God doing great things, when we see a healing, the purpose is not simply that our mouth might open in awe at the wonder of God and simply say, “Isn’t that a stupendous event?” But there’s a sign to that. It is an entrance for us into understanding the nature and compassion and power of God.

The Lord reveals to Moses that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart. That is a verse that has caused a great deal of ponderment. For the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart gives the appearance that the Lord, by sovereign action, has prevented the operation of free human choice. If the Lord has hardened Pharaoh’s heart, “What chance did the poor sucker have in the first place?” you might say.

Furthermore, we might look at what it means to harden the heart. We think of the heart in terms of our emotions. But the Old Testament thinks of the emotions in terms of another human organ—the “bowels.” The bowels described compassion, described emotion. The “heart” in the Old Testament described the will, the decision-making process by which we say yes or no. Therefore, when the term is used “harden the heart of Pharaoh” what is being hardened is his will.

There are two kinds of responses we may make to the phrase “I will harden his heart.” The first response is this: “Certainly Pharaoh cooperated with that hardening by hardening his own heart.” That is also used in the text of Exodus where there appears to be a cooperation of Pharaoh hardening his heart and God hardening his heart. This is in conjunction with the New Testament principle that if you’re moving away from God you move into greater darkness. If you’re moving in disobedience, you become capable of greater and greater disobedience. Whereas if you’re

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moving in love and trust and obedience, you become capable and more capable of additional love and trust and obedience.

When the Lord speaks to Moses in advance of anything Pharaoh has done in the presence of Moses, we would have to say that God is seen as preserving the right to judge. Pharaoh had already demonstrated his cruelty. He had already participated in genocide. He had already been brought by his sin under the action of God's wrath and judgment. Pharaoh therefore is typical of anyone who lives in disobedience to God. God's judgment may break in to the present moment. Not something simply reserved in the future. Already Pharaoh had done enough to incur the judgment of God. He demonstrated as a sinful person that a sinful person is subject to the wrath of God at any particular given moment of his life. Those who believe have experienced God's grace that they might be saved from God's wrath. It's a terrible thing to experience God's wrath. God does not harden by indiscrimination with a cavalier attitude. It has been a forging of Pharaoh's own rebellion and sin against God; now God says, "I will deal with that man for his sin."

Moses is to tell Pharaoh that Israel is God's firstborn and therefore they are very special in His presence: "I will slay your firstborn son if you don't let My firstborn son go." The term "firstborn" we find in Colossians 1:15 in reference to Christ. The Jehovah's Witnesses use this to claim there was a time when Christ the Son did not exist; that He came into existence, and was not eternal from the endless ages. Notice the term "firstborn" is used of Israel, and yet we know from a literal standpoint that Israel was not God's firstborn son. Adam was His firstborn. And God began the covenant with Abraham. It was given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and this Israel. "Firstborn" in its usage here denotes a spiritual relationship, not a literal point of birth. The term firstborn implies and teaches that Israel enjoyed a special love relationship with God.

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As Moses continues to move in the direction toward Egypt, in verses 24–26, an extraordinarily strange event happened. In a lodging place along the way, the Lord met him and sought to kill him. What in the world? The Lord has just told this man he's going to lead the people out. Now the Lord is seeking to kill him. What's going on?

Moses is being tested as a leader in regard to his obedience to the Lord. It is apparent in the verses which follow that Moses had allowed his sons to live outside the terms of God's covenant. The reference is to Genesis 17:9–27 where when God appeared to Abraham and gave to him the covenant that indeed from him would come generations which would be blessed. And Abraham would be given a land and the precise geographical terms are described. That covenant is ratified through circumcision. By circumcision God is stamping his mark of ownership on human sexuality. Moses' sons had not participated in that demand God had made to Abraham and to all succeeding generations. A mark of God's ownership on human sexuality, a mark that indeed that tests the provisions of God's covenant. It's striking by the way that in the Old Testament the root meaning of the word "covenant" is "to cut"—to cut a covenant. When God made the covenant with Abraham, one demonstration of it is in Genesis 15 where Abraham cut a heifer and God is seen as passing through it with smoking fire. It is the way that ancient people signified that an agreement had been reached. Instead of signing a contract or shaking hands, an animal was cut in two and there was therefore a ratification: "So may God cut us in two if we do not keep the words of this agreement." Therefore cutting was part of the teaching, the sign that the human who was making the response was keeping God's promises.

Evidently Moses had chosen to defer to his wife in regards to not circumcising his sons. His wife's attitude to the whole process of circumcision was carefully noted in verses 25–26 where when she sees Moses is about to die from the serious illness that had come upon him, she herself

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circumcises her sons and throws the remains of the circumcision at Moses' feet, then contemptuously says to him, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me" (Exodus 4:25, NIV). Her attitude is such that Moses cannot take her with him into Egypt. We read in Exodus 18:1–4 that when Moses later comes out with the children of Israel and comes to Midian, here his father-in-law Jethro tries to put together a reconciliation which is successful. But evidently at this moment in the text after Zipporah's great contempt toward Moses and the covenant of circumcision, Moses has to send her back to her father Jethro and the boys with her so they do not accompany him into Egypt. Zipporah was not the last spouse that tried to hinder the spiritual commitment of her mate. Her attitude is so expressive of an individual whose relationship tends to really hinder the development God has placed on one partner in the marriage who is really coming close to the Lord.

From this Moses arrives in Egypt. First of all, Aaron comes out to meet him (Exodus 4:27–28). A parting time of forty years, and tender emotions are expressed by the fact that Aaron met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Then following that meeting outside the boundary of Egypt, Moses and Aaron come and meet with the elders of Israel. Moses gives to them both word and signs. The same in the Gospels. Paul says to the Thessalonians, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Moses comes to the children of Israel, evidently throwing his rod down, grabbing the serpent by the tail and letting his hand become leprous and so by both word and sign God speaks to the elders of Israel. They respond with both belief and worship. They are ready to receive Moses as redeemer. Earlier in his life in Exodus 2 they had refused him as judge. Later they will refuse as well. It is one thing to experience deliverance. It's another thing to come in under authority. The

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children of Israel are ready to be delivered but they're never quite ready to come in under obedience. It's wonderful to be redeemed, but another thing to be disciplined.

II. There comes a test of encounter with Pharaoh in Exodus 5:1–9.

Moses has come into Pharaoh's presence. Moses' request is seen in verse 1: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says" (NIV). What an introduction! "Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert" (NIV). This is in accordance with God's direction, but the first request is that it be for a limited time. The point could be raised, why didn't God simply crush Pharaoh by a terrific miracle? Why a drawn out process of argument and negotiations and signs? Why didn't God just do it quickly? The response is simply this; that it is consistent with God's dealings that He gives even the most rebellious of hearts time to respond. He does not want to terrify anyone into submission. He respects the understanding and the judgment and the mind and the will and the power He has given to each individual human being. By appealing to one's will, which in itself is a gift of God, God seeks to lead that person to repentance and faith and obedience, done with one straight blow.

His response to Moses was "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?" (verse 2, NIV). He does not know God. And his willful ignorance of God will inevitably lead to injustice toward other men. So upon saying, "Who is God?" The next thing you find him doing in verses 6 and 7 is making the terms of slavery harder. That's extremely consistent to what Paul teaches in Romans 1. When we give up knowledge of God, inevitably human relationships suffer. The lack of response to God brings lack of response to others. We expect ignorance toward God to bring injustice toward others.

Moses in verse 3 is seen as making a terribly weak response once Pharaoh puts him down: "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer

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sacrifices to the LORD our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword” (NIV).

Weak! The pestilence does not fall upon the Hebrews. Moses is trying to be diplomatic at this point. Moses should have said again, “Thus says the Lord God! Let My people go. And if you don’t, pestilence is going to fall upon you.” But in Pharaoh’s presence Moses weakens his hold upon the truth.

Moses is not the last to falter and fold in the presence of earthly power. He’s not the last witness for Christ who in the presence of someone in a school or in an office when asked about the Lord and called to make a stand makes some kind of weak response. Pharaoh, in verses 4–9, seeing how Moses handles the situation, gives a very harsh edict. Pharaoh easily takes the initiative away from Moses and Moses is made to appear incredibly inept. The whole first encounter that Moses has with Pharaoh is a loss and a failure.

How would you feel if you were called by God in a miraculous way to be a deliverer and you came with a strong assurance it was going to happen, but as a result of the first test you walked away from it whipped?

Things got worse. Moses didn’t survive this encounter with Pharaoh very well.

III. Next comes the test of unexpected reverses.

The Lord clearly warned that Pharaoh would not fold easily or quickly give in (4:21). But Moses could have said, “Who would have expected this? Who would have expected the reverses of no straw for bricks? And gather the straw yourself?” Previously the straw had been furnished.

Furthermore, the Hebrew foremen working under Egyptian taskmasters were to be beaten if he people didn’t get their quota out. Moses will say, “Lord, this is unfair.” God has told them that things would not be easy, but Moses had not expected them to be this hard. How often in our Christian experience we go through these kind of things.

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We come to Christ and we know He promises us glory. But He also promises us trouble. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). We’d like to separate the glory from the trouble. We don’t recognize that glory and trouble and danger and testing are part of Christian experience. Sometimes we’re not prepared to handle it because we don’t realize it is part of our portion to face adversity. We can’t expect glory and not at the same time expect testing and trouble as well. Moses is unprepared to handle the reverses.

The responses made to the reverses are interesting, in Exodus 5:15–21. The first response is to Pharaoh, in verses 15–19. Basically they say, “It’s unrealistic for you to do this to us.” He says, “You are just lazy and not working hard enough.” So he orders them to keep their quota and the foremen to be beaten if they don’t get the quota. Seeing that they’re not getting anywhere negotiating with Pharaoh, they come to Moses and Aaron in verses 20–21 and say, “The LORD look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (NIV). Just days before they were falling down at the signs and wonders that Moses did and believing and worshipping. Now their whole attitude has changed around. “You’ve given Pharaoh an instrument with which to kill us.” Simply because God has not acted the way we had anticipated we become very offended with God. If the children of Israel had had faith at this moment, it would have seemed that Pharaoh was screwing the lid down harder in order that God might blow it up higher. Often in our reverses we fail to see that the lid is being screwed down harder in order that the victory might be greater; instead we respond with unbelief.

This gets to Moses and he has to respond, in verses 22–23. Are God’s great leaders ever depressed? Yes, they are. “Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon

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this people, and you have not rescued your people at all” (NIV). God, you failed. That’s a prayer of depression. There is no faith in this prayer. No victory in this prayer. Only questions. Only reverses.

This is the fifth time so far in the Book of Exodus where Moses is seen as a failure. I think that is given to us to demonstrate that the victory which God accomplishes is really His victory. Not simply because Moses was a super great person. The whole enterprise of deliverance really belongs to God.

Look at the failures of Moses—he is an aborted revolutionary in Exodus 2:11–15; in response to God’s call there’s at least five objections he gives in 3:11–4:17. He neglects the sign of circumcision in Exodus 4. He folds in Pharaoh’s presence, Exodus 5. Now here he has a total lack of faith in God.

God responds to Moses in Exodus 6:1: “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country” (NIV). That’s the beginning of God’s response. Notice that when God begins His response, He does not answer Moses’ question. Moses had asked, “Why did you do evil to this people?” The Lord does not respond. God will not explain to Moses. He will simply point Moses immediately to the future. How often does God do that with us? Questions which we have as to why things happened the way they did, the Lord in our lifetime here will not answer. Instead, He will simply point us to the future and say, “Continue following me and you will see my will, My person and glory.” It is to the future that God points Moses. God reminds Moses in verses 2–5 of the revelation that God had given at Sinai. That God is the I am. The previous patriarchs, Moses is told, did not know God’s name. We know from the text of Genesis that they were given God’s name—Yahweh or Jehovah. They did not know it in the sense that they did not experientially

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know God in the way He revealed himself in the Exodus, the way God would reveal Himself as redeemer. God is never called the redeemer in the Book of Genesis. That term is used in Exodus to describe the activity of God, the revelation of the character of God as our redeemer.

In Exodus 6:6–8, God makes promises to Moses about the future. God will bring three things. God will bring freedom, God will bring relationship, and God will bring the future. These are the very kinds of things that Christ himself brings. Jesus brings us freedom, He brings us relationship with God, and He brings us our future. In these three concepts—freedom, relationship, and future, the Lord uses some seven different statements in which He is found as saying, “I will.” There are three statements, which relate to the concept of freedom. God says, “I will bring you out, I will free you, and I will redeem you” (see verse 6). Here is the word “redeem” for the first time in Exodus. Only once before is it even used in the Bible. That’s a description of a human redeeming. It’s basically a term used of buying someone out of slavery. This is God acting as the kinsman-redeemer or relative redeemer of Israel. Freedom through redemption.

Then relationship. God says, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (verse 7, NIV). And the future—“I will bring you to the land...I will give it to you” (NIV).

We recognize that in the words of Christ we have these things. Through redemption God brings us freedom. Through redemption God brings us personal relationship to Himself. Through redemption God brings us into the future. Canaan in the Old Testament is what heaven is for us in the New Testament. Egypt in the New Testament is this life where in the Old Testament it was a physical entity. It is the bondage of being captive of sin and death. God brings us out.

Having been reassured of the future by the Lord, Moses is ready to go back to the people of Israel. They have one response in verse 9. “Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not

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listen to him because of their discouragement [or, “broken spirit”] and cruel bondage” (NIV).

Broken spirit. How true it is that something may become so intense that one is unable to have faith in God’s promises. So lost in defeat, so lost in reverses that someone else has to have the faith to reach out and believe. The person is literally like Israel—broken in spirit.

IV. Moses is further tested in 6:10–7:7 by impossible orders.

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his country’ (6:11, NIV). Moses objects to this. No wonder. He had had such an experience previously before Pharaoh, now he was to go back in. Moses says, “I’m of uncircumcised lips.”

The term “uncircumcised lips” means he had a deficiency which interferes with this efficiency.

In Jeremiah, Jeremiah describes the uncircumcised ear—an ear which cannot harken. And in

Leviticus, Moses describes an uncircumcised heart—a heart that cannot understand. Moses

described himself as having uncircumcised lips; he is again recalling to God that he has a speech deficiency. The Lord nevertheless insists that Moses go in with Aaron and charge Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to bring the people of Israel out of the land. We’d expect in verse 13 to find in verse 14 the experience of Moses and Aaron actually going in to talk with Pharaoh.

Then all of a sudden in the text is something very strange—a genealogical record. Why would the writer think it’s so important to have the record in the midst of this exciting encounter that he’d list a genealogy? There’s a reason for doing it. Genealogical records have been called God’s connective tissue, something which holds the head onto the back of an animal—not very pretty, but very necessary. The reason why the connective tissue is inserted here is to show Moses and Aaron’s relationships to the family tree. Also the focus of the genealogy is on account of Levi, which will become very important in Israel’s history. It also links together at this moment, just

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before the Exodus, God's people of the past with God's people of the future. Other generations will feel a continuity to what God has done the past.

The Lord reemphasizes in verses 6:28–7:7 that Moses failed. Pharaoh's initial hardness is to be met with an escalation of God's demands. Moses had gone in the first time and said, "Let my people go for a brief journey into the wilderness." Now it's "Let the people go—altogether!" Moses had folded in making the initial request of letting the people go for three days. Now he's to go in and do something that must have seemed to him like a total impossibility. God relates His demands upon Moses and upon Pharaoh. God reemphasizes and responds to Moses by indicating to him what is to really happen when he goes in. Next week we'll look at the encounter with Pharaoh, the breaking of the hard heart.

But we'll close with verse 7 that the writer of Exodus cannot help but make that when Moses and Aaron go in before Pharaoh, Moses is eighty and Aaron is eighty-three. What a remarkable feat it would have been for an eighty-three-year-old person to have walked into the presence of the Pharaoh.

Moody has said, Moses spent the first forty years of his life in Pharaoh's court thinking he was somebody, the next forty years in the desert learning that he was nobody. Then he spent the last forty years of his life showing what God can do with a somebody who found out he was a nobody.

Closing Prayer

We're in the same situation, Lord, many times in regard to the promise You have made to us about the future. For example, the promise that You would bring us out of death into heaven. Our own "exodus" which none of us have yet faced. Yet we continually hear the promise that is repeated to us day after day in Your word, week after week, that You have a great and mighty act

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reserved for each one of us that You would bring us out with a strong hand and mighty force.

There are times Moses staggered at that great price. We too can't really put it together and believe that You're going to do it. Lord, You don't often explain to us why we're going through a particular experience. You simply keep pointing us to the future. As if the future was a magnet to draw us out of difficulties, to bring us to Yourself. Lord, it's with faith and obedience that each of us may be a participant experiencing that deliverance You have for each one of us when through Your mighty act You cause to happen to us the redemption of our souls. We don't want to stagger with unbelief, but respond with belief. That the purpose of Your Word is that we might have comfort and encouragement, we might have examples that we might check our own behavior, our own notions with those given in Your Word that through it we might have a word of hope. You are the God who keeps calling. The God who will not let us go. The God who keeps insisting in spite of ourselves, in spite of our objections, in spite of our failures and our folding that You will bring us through. God, cause our hearts in response to You to be the exact opposite to that of Pharaoh's—yielding to You that we might have a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith in each of us. We pray these things through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.