

This evening we have come to Exodus chapter 4: verses 18-31. Please keep your Bibles open there and then bow your heads with me as we go to God for His help in prayer.

“Father, we pray that Your Word would be the source of life and sustenance to us. We confess with grief that Your Word has often been spoken to us, yet rarely heard by us; we have studied it and been unchanged by it; we have felt its challenges and been warmed by its comforts, we have been instructed by its truths and informed by its teaching, and yet still we have lived as though our lives were our own and we have not been bought at a price. Now, Lord, with Your Word spread before us, we humble ourselves, confessing our sin and dullness of hearing and slowness to obey. And we cry out that the ministry of the gospel among us tonight might be accompanied by the blessing, presence and unction of Your Spirit that we might have ears to hear and hearts that respond like good soil welcoming the seed and producing a harvest. Come, Almighty Lord, and so speak that we might awaken from spiritual sloth to bow in wonder and praise beneath the cross of Christ our Savior, in whose name we now pray,

Amen.”

Your employer has sent you to an office that has been mismanaged badly. You are there to trouble shoot, fire employees if necessary and fix the situation no matter what. As you begin to get to know the situation better, the more mess you uncover, the more complex and tangled the problems and the more you feel out of your depths. When you were asked to take this important job on, you felt the warm glow of affirmation. But now that you’re in situ you wonder what you were thinking of taking the job in the first place. You feel completely ill prepared for it. You don’t have the resources for the task.

That, I think, is a dim reflection of the situation Moses finds himself in here in Exodus, chapter 4. He is being asked to return to Egypt. Moses has protested, again and again, climaxing with the desperate plea of 4:13 that God “please send someone else, anyone else, just don’t send me!” To each objection, however, God has responded with an irrefutable argument. He has displayed to Moses some aspect or

other of Himself, His name, glory, greatness, or power. And so now, in verse 18 of chapter 4, Moses has lost all the arguments, and he has now, at long last, to actually make the return journey.

So he asks his father-in-law, for whom he has been working as a shepherd and who is the patriarch of the family unit into which Moses has married, if he might be released to return. The language Moses uses is a Hebrew idiom that simply indicates that Moses wants to see how his people are faring under the yoke of Egyptian oppression. Now it is entirely speculation, of course, but it may be that Moses was hoping that Jethro would say, “You know, Moses, I’d like to help you out, but we just can’t spare you right now. Best wait a while.” Or “Moses, you’re crazy and there is no way I’m going to let you take my daughter back to that country.”² Then he’d be off the hook, right? Certainly in verse 19 Moses still requires another prod from the LORD before he actually begins his journey back to Egypt. He is dragging his heels at least. Well, contrary to what may have been Moses’ real hopes, Jethro gives his permission and blessing. And so now there is no way out. Jethro says go. The Lord won’t let him forget to go. He has no excuses and no way out. He has to go.

But as he goes, the Lord will demonstrate to Moses that all the promises of help and support and provision were not empty talk. He will demonstrate to Moses yet again, though certainly not for the last time, that God is the Lord of covenant faithfulness upon whom he can rely in every and all circumstances into which the Lord leads him.

And that is a vitally important lesson we all need to learn, is it not? We’ve heard the promises of God many times, perhaps. We’ve listened as His character has been expounded to us from the scriptures, perhaps. God’s Word has made plain that we can and should trust Him. But there are times, aren’t there, that, when it gets down to it, our circumstances leave us feeling way out of our depth, wondering if, despite the promises and character of God, the resources really are available to be faithful in these particular extremities of need.

Well, Exodus 4:18-31 addresses that question directly, and it does so by pointing us to three truths about God. First, in verses 18-20, we learn about the provision of God; then, secondly, in 21-26, the holiness of God; and then finally, in

22-23 and 27-31, we learn about the faithfulness of God. (The provision, holiness, and faithfulness of God)

So first of all, let me invite you to look with me at verses 18-20: *The Provision of God*. Moses, as we've seen now, has no hiding place left. Jethro has released him. God has both commissioned him in chapters 3-4, and renewed his command to go in verse 19. What is important to see is that God makes a twofold provision for Moses as he goes.

The first is the word of assurance and promise that He gives along with His command in verse 19, "Go return to Egypt; for all the men are dead who sought your life." It seems that some of Moses' reluctance has to do with fear of those who seek his life. Moses is a wanted man in Egypt. He is, as the saying goes, wanted dead or alive. And so God reassures Moses with this word of comfort. The men you fear, Moses, are all dead. The way is clear for you to return. The Lord could simply have commanded Moses to go and that would have been enough. The Lord is the great King. He is the only true and sovereign God. Submission to His will is a mark of devotion. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God need only command and Moses would be obligated to obey without question. But God in His great love for Moses doesn't do that, does He? He comes alongside Moses and provides for him a word of comfort and assurance. Moses should have understood that the providence of God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. He ought to have known that the Lord would not send him back to Egypt without providing for him the resources he needs to accomplish the task for which he has been called, murderous Egyptians notwithstanding. God does not promise our comfort or our safety or our earthly ease. He never promises that all will be well. In fact, He promises that if we are follower of Jesus Christ, "in this world you will have trouble." But when the clear command and call of God rests upon us, as Samuel Rutherford put it, "we are immortal until our work is done." No matter the obstacles arrayed against us, the work the Lord would have us do, He will also provide for, so that we can do it.

And so God comes to Moses with a word of comfort and assurance. His faith is bolstered in the sovereign mercy and grace of God. God truly does mean what He said when He commissioned Moses to go back. Moses does not go alone. God goes with him to strengthen and equip him. And, dear friends, we ought also to take great

comfort here. We are not and will never be in Moses' place. The particular circumstances he faced we will never face, but the principle stands nevertheless: God is gracious to provide whatever we need according to His riches in glory, that all the praise might be His and His kingdom advance. God never calls us to serve and then leaves us alone to do it.

And the second part of God's provision is found at the end of verse 20. Look at it, please, "So Moses took his wife and sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand."

Moses had his shepherd's staff with which he was to perform the authenticating miracle, throwing it down and having turn into a serpent, than taking it up and it would turn back to a staff of wood. But now this simply rude shepherd crook is given a new name. It is the rod of God. The rod, as we saw two weeks ago, was a potent symbol of supernatural power in Egypt. Egyptian magicians did counterfeit miracles with their rods. By means of wicked power and simple deceptions Satan deceived the people of Egypt through these men and their magical rods of power. And Moses is being sent back to face these men in what will become a direct confrontation. But he goes back equipped. He does not go back powerless. The staff he carries is the rod of God. Its power is not in the staff nor in Moss who carries it. It is the staff of God. The power working through this rod is the hand of the living God Himself. So Moses goes back with a double provision. He has the assuring word of God and the enabling power of God. And these two are both the condition of all effective ministry in the Lord's name, and the provision of God for ministry to all who serve him. Without the assuring word of God and the mighty power of God there can be no ministry to the glory of God.

Now before we move on, I wonder if you heard any echoes as you listened to God's promise to Moses? You know, sometimes when you read a biblical text, it is as though a bell had been struck and its sound reverberates across the Bible's storyline and finds echoes in several important places connecting themes and drawing us to a fuller picture not only of God's work in this particular text but on the grand scale of redemptive history. Well, this is one of those moments. The bell of divine revelation has begun to chime. A holy family rides a donkey down into Egypt. God assures them that those who sought their lives are now dead. Can you hear the echoes that resound across biblical history? They take us to Bethlehem, don't they? Where Mary and Joseph saddle a donkey and flee to Egypt with their

new baby boy, Jesus Christ, our Lord. In Matthew 2:20 the Lord speaks to Joseph and does so in language borrowed from Exodus 4:20, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young child’s life are dead.”

What is fascinating is the way the Exodus story is inverted in the account of the flight and return of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. Egypt for *Moses* was the place of danger from which God’s covenant people must be redeemed and called out. Egypt was the place where a redemptive confrontation with sin and evil would take place. Those who sought to kill Moses live in Egypt, and now that they are dead he must go back there. For *Jesus*, however, *Egypt* was the safe place and *Israel* was the place of confrontation with spiritual wickedness. It is to Israel that Jesus must now come, and it is from among the people of Judea that He will call to Himself a church, and *reconstitute* the people of God, by means of a new exodus in which He Himself would be both a new Moses to lead us from slavery and the Passover lamb to deliver us from death. By the time of Christ, the land of promise and the Jewish people have degenerated so far from faithfulness to the covenant of grace that they have become a virtually a new Egypt, and Christ must lead a new mission of confrontation and redemption from among them.

So first of all, we are pointed to the provision of God. Then secondly, we are confronted with the holiness of God. Look with me at verses 21-26, please. There are two confrontations that take place with individuals and the holiness of God. The first of them is a confrontation that will take place between Pharaoh and God, and the second takes place between Moses and God. Look at verse 21, first of all please. God gives to Moses his marching orders as it were. He’s to go back and make sure he does all the signs God has given him to do before Pharaoh. “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will not let the people go.”

The heart is not the center of emotional life, as it is for most of us today. In Scripture, the heart is the center of the human personality, the seat of the will, the intellect and the affections together. So to have a hard heart is to be closed from the core and essence of our being to the word and will of God. God tells Moses that He is going to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he will not let the Hebrews go. He is going to make his heart like flint so that the word of God coming to him through Moses and authenticated by miraculous signs would simply bounce off. God would make Pharaoh’s heart impervious to His Word.

This is a judicial act on God's part. In His wrath He is handing Pharaoh over to his rebellion with a view to his eventual and final destruction in due course. God is setting Pharaoh on an inevitable collision course with His holiness and justice and righteousness. This is a chilling prediction that ought to deeply solemnize us all. That God might, out of His own infinite holiness, and to the praise of His glorious justice, harden our hearts and fix the trajectory of our lives so that we inexorably move toward judgment day refusing to bow the knee to His Lordship, should remind us that we all live before the eye of the infinitely Holy Lord, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. God hates sin. He burns with an unquenchable hatred towards your sin. And we must not think to play fast and loose with Him, as though judgment were a thing only to be feared in the life to come. No, God acts judicially in history in the hardening of hearts.

And how does this hardening take place? Sometimes in scripture the hardening of heart is said to result from our own willful and rebellious decisions. It is spoken of as a consequence or result of our own free actions. In Exodus 8:32, for example, Pharaoh hardens his own heart. In 1 Samuel 6:6 the Philistines are warned not to harden their hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened theirs. The book of Hebrews, quoting Psalm 94, warns us not to harden our hearts against God. So hardening of our hearts is something we do when we embrace unbelief despite the repeated warnings and counsel of God. We harden our own hearts against God in our sin. And at the same time it is also clear from this text and others like Joshua 11:20 that hardness of heart is something God does. Joshua 11:20 says, "For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses." It was the LORD's will that their hearts should be hardened so that they would come and fight and be destroyed.

These two sides of this reality are not opposed but actually express the ordinary manner in which the sovereignty of God works itself out in the world. God never overrides and runs roughshod over the top of our desires as some accuse Calvinism of teaching. No, we teach that God's sovereignty is so wise and so universal that it includes the free choices of human beings so that our rebellion is bounded by the decree of God, and the consequences of our own choices, like hardness of heart, are exactly and simultaneously the result of God's sovereign plan and holy purpose. All of which means that willful persistent sin may lead to our hardening our own hearts, which would be the expression and manifestation of the

just judgment of God on us, as He hands us over, in the language of Romans 1, to the excesses and consequences of our own sin. If we have not yet repented and believed the gospel for ourselves, we are supposed to read Exodus 4:21 and tremble. The message is clear. If you go up against the holiness of God, you will always lose. The terrifying thing is that for Pharaoh the hardness of his heart was a thing he embraced and did not realize he was embracing the wrath of God itself. There is an urgency to the gospel for precisely this reason. It cannot wait until another day. You must not put it off till a better time. God acts in history, in your life, in your own choices, to work out your destiny and execute His justice. The only safe hiding place is Jesus Christ.

The second confrontation with God's holiness takes place in verses 24-26. It is a curious incident. Moses has set out to obey the call of God on his life and return to Egypt. His wife and sons are with him, and they are trekking back along the road when we read the enigmatic words, "the LORD met him and sought to kill him." The holiness of God suddenly blazed forth in deadly power towards Moses. Here is a fresh confrontation between Moses and God, and this time Moses, like Pharaoh has been made subject to the wrath of God. Why? The reason is that Moses has neglected to apply the sign of the covenant to his children. After all that God had said to him about God's own faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that he was now doing in and through Moses was in fulfillment of His covenant promises to them, after all this God's holiness means destruction for Moses because, unlike the faithfulness of God to His covenant, Moss has been unfaithful. God has never neglected to keep His word. But Moses has disobeyed the command of the Lord. Sometimes I will hear people say things like, "Baptism is a secondary issue," and they'd be right. Salvation does not hinge on your view of baptism. However *sometimes* what is really being said is that baptism doesn't matter. Covenant signs don't matter. We can take them or leave them. We don't need to worry about being biblical in our thinking regarding them.

Well, Moses may have agreed with you as he set out from Midian, but Zipporah, Moses' wife, certainly would not. She sees immediately what the problem is and circumcises her sons, throws the foreskins at Moses' feet and names him a bridegroom of blood to her. Now it's probably impossible to identify everything that is going on here, but at the least there is a rebuke here from Zipporah to her husband for his failure to lead as the man of God in his own home, even as he sets out to lead the people of God. The covenant sign of circumcision, or baptism for that matter, are

the beginnings and serve as important indicators of the faithfulness of godly parents to put the claims of Christ first in their home. Moses was failing and the holiness of God almost destroyed him. That circumcision led to his deliverance points us to the gospel significance of covenant signs. Both circumcision and baptism point to the removal of the wrath of God. Ultimately they point us to Christ by whose blood, shed to cut away our sin, and to wash us clean, we are saved from the condemnation we deserve.

Then finally, notice the faithfulness of God. God makes provision for Moses. God's holiness confronts Moses. Now we see the faithfulness of God.

Look first at verses 22-23. God describes Israel as His firstborn son. God is acting to rescue His son from Egypt, and He will kill Pharaoh's son if he will not release Israel. Here we glimpse the heart of God, our heavenly Father. Yes, He is fearful in His holiness and justice and righteousness. But He is also wonderfully tender and compassionate towards His covenant people. He is our Father. And here He acts to defend and protect and rescue His children.

In the Bible there are really three important sons of God. There is Adam, whom Luke calls the son of God in Luke 3:38. Then there is Israel, whom God calls His firstborn son here. Then there is Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. The first son, Adam, speaks of his catastrophic failure to obey. Ever since, we have been unable to please God or win acceptance with Him. The second son, Israel, speaks to us of God's redeeming plan. He will save and adopt and deliver a people for Himself from Adam's fallen race. The *third* Son tells us how we go from the position of heirs of Adam to the position of inheritors of the salvation of Israel. What bridges the gulf from guilty to redeemed? It is the cross of Jesus Christ. As a second Adam He obeyed, replacing the first Adam's sin with His obedience. He bled and died, bearing the curse the first Adam incurred. And He rose, because as Second Adam, He had done nothing worthy of the wages of sin. There the curse was broken and redemption accomplished for everyone who believes.

Here in Exodus 4 God is keeping His covenant with His people. That covenant faithfulness would find its climax and summit in the cross of His only begotten Son the Lord Jesus Christ. As He sends Moses to call Pharaoh to let God's son go, we need to know that in the end it was not Pharaoh's son that was the

ultimate price of our rescue, but the life of God's own Son Himself by which we were brought from slavery into newness of life.

And finally in verses 27-31, we find Aaron and Moses doing all that God had told them to do. And here, gloriously, we read of the response of a child of God to the provision, holiness, and covenant faithfulness of their heavenly Father, "so the people believed, and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their afflictions, then they bowed their heads and worshipped."

This is the posture of all who know their God and who have tasted His covenant faithfulness to them in the provision of His Son to be their only Savior and Lord. Let us join together in obedience to their example and bow our heads and worship.

Let us pray....