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The Lord Sought to Put Him to Death Exodus 4:18-31

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The last two weeks we looked at Exodus 3 and the first half of Exodus 4. This was Moses' encounter with the God of Israel, the I AM, at the burning bush in the Sinai wilderness. Moses had, more or less, given up on delivering his people. He had tried once. He had failed. Pharaoh wanted him dead for his efforts. His people didn't respect him and wouldn't follow his lead. And so Moses has fled to the wilderness, where he met up with distant relatives, married, and now has two sons. He was happy herding sheep in the wilderness. Then the Lord met him and reminded him of his calling. Moses objected: They won't trust you. They won't trust me. They won't even trust that I've met you. But the Lord insisted. First, the timing was now right and, more importantly, the Lord himself was going to go with and be with Moses. He even gave Moses signs to show to the leaders of Israel so that they would know.

Today we'll pick up the text at 4:18 and finish the chapter. These are some notoriously difficult verses—probably the most difficult passage in the entire Pentateuch. I'm going to explain the story as best I can, but—I'll warn you up front—I could be wrong. My interpretation is not infallible. That's always true, but it's worth making it clear every once in a while, especially when we come to such a difficult passage. So...Exodus 4:18.

Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether

they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

From his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush, Moses returned to Jethro. He's got to give some explanation. He'd been taking care of Jethro's sheep all these years and, as we'll see, he wasn't planning to return to Egypt alone. His wife and sons were going with him—Jethro's daughter and grandchildren. I've wondered if Moses hoped Jethro would refuse: "No, you can't take my daughter to Egypt!" One last chance to be let off the hook.

It's interesting that Moses says nothing about his encounter with God. He doesn't even spell out the real reason for going back to Egypt. He simply says that he wants to see if his brothers in Egypt are still alive. Now, that doesn't mean Moses didn't tell Jethro about the burning bush or that he was being sent back to deliver his people. But what the narrator tells us—and specifically the wording he uses—links what Moses is about to do with what had caused Moses to flee from Egypt in the first place. He had gone out to see his brothers in their oppression. But the last time the Lord wasn't with him. This time the Lord *is* with him. Today we might call it a "reboot". Jethro sends Moses and his family off with his blessing.

Look now at verses 19 and 20:

And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

Tense in Hebrew is often contextual, so this may be an expansion of what the Lord had already told Moses at the burning bush or the Lord may be speaking to him again. Either way, we're reminded of Moses' mission to Egypt and Moses is reassured that, at least at this point, there's no reason to

fear for his life. He saddles up his wife and sons—we've already been told about Gershom and we'll be told later about Eliezer—and, most important, he takes the staff. It's no longer Moses' staff, but God's—the means through which the Lord will manifest himself to both the Egyptians and the Israelites.

Off they go, but then the Lord speaks again—or maybe the narrator is strategically interjecting something the Lord had already said at the bush:

And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" (Exodus 4:21-23)

Back in 3:19 the Lord told Moses that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go unless compelled by a mighty hand. Now he expands on that theme. He reminds Moses of the signs he gave him. Remember from last Sunday: the staff that turned into a snake, the diseased hand that was made healthy again, and the water from the Nile that turned to blood. I doubt that Moses had forgotten these dramatic signs, but the Lord had said that they were to convince the leaders of the Israelites. Now he says that Moses is to do them before Pharaoh. This is God's mighty hand. And yet the Lord now says that he will harden Pharaoh's heart. Despite these signs, Pharaoh will refuse. But his refusal will give Moses the opportunity to declare the Lord's judgement. And that judgement begins with a declaration of Israel's ownership. "Israel is *my* firstborn son," declares the Lord. You see, Pharaoh considered Israel his property. Israel existed to serve Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt. And Pharaoh could do as he pleased with

his property. He could work the people to death. He could drown their sons in the Nile. Or so he thought. But Moses is to declare on behalf of the Lord, “Israel is *my* son; not yours. Israel is *my* servant; not yours. And if you refuse to release *my* firstborn son, the life of *your* firstborn will be forfeit!”

This is a rich statement. It establishes that the God of Israel is more powerful than Pharaoh and his gods. But, most important, it emphasizes the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people and it stresses the nature and purpose of God’s deliverance. Brothers and Sisters, first, God’s people are his children. He calls Israel his firstborn. But it goes for us as well. Who else is called firstborn in the Bible? Jesus is. He is God’s son. He is the culmination of everything that Israel was meant to be. And that makes us—we are united with Jesus, as St. Paul puts it, we who are “in Christ”, “in the Messiah”—that makes us children of God by adoption through that union with God’s son. We are his people. But, notice secondly, God doesn’t just free his people so that they can be free. He doesn’t just free them because he doesn’t like oppression. It’s true that God does not like oppression. He makes that point repeatedly in the Bible. But notice what the Lord stresses he is to say to Pharaoh, “Let my son go *that he may serve me.*” For God’s people freedom is not an end in itself; freedom is a means to something greater.

God delivers his people, he frees us from our captors, so that we may serve him. That’s what he created human beings to do in the first place. In our rebellion, we subjected ourselves to sin and death. God’s purpose in calling Israel was to create a people who would fulfil humanity’s creation mandate to serve him. He delivered Israel from Pharaoh’s bondage so they could serve him. And, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, he delivers us from our bondage to sin

and death so that we can serve him. We’re often guilty of forgetting that. We often preach a self-centred gospel that focuses so much on the therapeutic that we forget God’s real purpose. God’s salvation isn’t just a “Get out of hell free” card so that we can go on and do as we please. God’s salvation isn’t about going to heaven when we die. It’s not even just about freeing us from sin so that we can be more holy in the way we live our lives. The gospel is the message that the King, when he rose from the dead, inaugurated God’s kingdom and unleashed new creation into the world. The gospel is the proclamation that through Jesus, God is making new the creation we corrupted—and that new creation includes us. The gospel is the message that through Jesus, we are forgiven for our rebellion so that we can once again serve the King as we were created to do. The Israelites were freed from Pharaoh to serve the Lord and you and I have been freed from sin and death for the same purpose: to serve the Lord.

Now, in verses 24 through 27, the story takes a very weird turn:

At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone. It was then that she said, “A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision.

This is the trickiest part of the passage. One of the problems is that the Hebrew just says “he” and “his” and “him” and it’s not clear if it’s talking about Moses or Moses’ son or even the Lord. The ESV fills in some of those details, but it’s speculative. Who did the Lord seek to kill? Almost everyone agrees that “him” is Moses. Why did the Lord seek to kill him? Whom did Zipporah circumcise? Moses or one of their sons? Whom did she touch with the

foreskin? What does her statement about a “bridegroom of blood” mean? What does the whole thing mean? Let me reconstruct the story, filling in the details, based on the study I’ve done.

On the way to Egypt Moses again encounters the Lord, who seeks to kill him. The Hebrew word for “met” is fairly rare, but it links this passage with the next one. In verses 27 and 28 we hear about Aaron going out to meet his brother, Moses, in the wilderness. The verb implies that this was a very real and physical encounter. Some commentators argue that the Lord struck Moses with some kind of illness that incapacitated him, but that ignores the personal nature of this encounter that the verb demands. But whereas Moses’ meeting with Aaron was friendly and warm, here the Lord seeks to kill Moses. Note that it doesn’t say that the Lord tried and failed. If the Lord wanted Moses dead, Moses would have died. Period. The sense is that the Lord was angry with Moses and confronted him in such a way as to give him an opportunity to make things right. Given that it was a personal encounter, I think the best comparison we can draw on is Jacob’s encounter with the angel of the Lord the night before he returned to Canaan, that episode where the two wrestled all night long. In this case, the Lord—or his representative, the “angel of the Lord” character we’ve met before—comes to Moses in a similar way and seizes him. Moses was incapacitated, leaving his wife to remedy the situation. Picture Moses, held by the Lord in a sort of wrestling pin.

Interestingly, Zipporah knew exactly what needed to be done. She took their son and a flint knife and circumcised him. She knew that the Lord was angry with Moses because he had neglected to circumcise one of his sons. Remember how important circumcision was. In Genesis 17 the Lord had established it as *the* sign of his covenant with Abraham and his people. Every boy was to be

circumcised when we was eight days old and, the Lord had said, that anyone who went uncircumcised—and by extension any father who neglected to circumcise his sons—was to be cut off from the covenant himself. Circumcision was the symbol that embodied the Lord’s covenant promise. To receive it was an act of faith that brought with it covenant membership. To reject it was to reject, to break the Lord’s covenant.

Moses had broken the covenant, and yet he was the one called to lead the Lord’s covenant people out of Egypt and into the promised land. This has to be dealt with before Moses can do what the Lord has called him to do. So far I think this follows a pretty straightforward reading of the text. But which son was circumcised? Why one and not both? How did Zipporah know? And what do her words mean?

Let me suggest that it was not Gershom, the firstborn, but Eliezer the secondborn who is circumcised here. When Gershom was born, Moses would naturally have circumcised him. Now, the Midianites practiced circumcision, but they practiced it as a puberty rite, something done just before marriage. It’s not hard to imagine Zipporah being furious with Moses for circumcising their son. And with that in mind, it’s not hard to imagine that when Eliezer was born, Moses opted not to circumcise him in order to keep peace with his wife. I think this is the best explanation of why only one son needed to be circumcised. Now, with Moses pinned in a wrestling hold by the Lord, Zipporah knows what she has to do. She circumcises Eliezer. The Hebrew word translated “he let him alone” has the sense of a wrestler relaxing his hold. Zipporah saved the day by her obedience, but her words and her actions suggest disgust and anger. This was not the practise of her people.

But who is her anger directed at? I think she’s angry with Moses. Her

marriage to him has forced her into this practise that she found repugnant. But she acts to save Moses’ life. All of this anger could be directed at him, but let me suggest that she’s really angry with the Lord. It was the Lord’s command that Moses obeyed when he circumcised Gershom and now it’s the Lord who forces her to circumcise Eliezer. The Hebrew doesn’t make it clear whose feet she touches with the bloody foreskin, but I think it was likely the Lord’s. She may have thrown it at his feet in anger, “Here! You want my son’s foreskin so much, you can have it!” Because of the circumcision she calls the Lord a bride-groom of blood—he’s like those in her own culture who circumcised the bridegroom just before marriage.

I think this explains another difficult part of the story. We read here that Moses headed for Egypt with his wife and sons, but later—after the Exodus, when the Israelites arrive in Midian—she appears with her father to meet Moses. Zipporah was willing to save Moses’ life, but in anger she left him, going home to her father. This may also explain the remarriage of Moses in Numbers. Zipporah certainly could have died, but nothing is ever said of that. It may simply have been that when the Israelites marched on from Saini, Zipporah—still angry with Moses and the Lord—refused to go.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the Lord has also spoken to Aaron:

The LORD said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do.
(Exodus 4:28-29)

The Lord directs Aaron as he’s directed Moses and they meet up at Horeb or Sinai, somewhere between Midian and Egypt. Moses tells Aaron everything that the Lord has told him

as they return to Egypt. We get the first sense that things really have changed and that the Lord can be trusted in verse 29. The people had once rejected Moses, but now they listen as Aaron speaks.

Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people.

Again, things have changed. This time it’s happening in the Lord’s timing and on his initiative. Moses isn’t doing it on his own; the Lord is with him. Look at verses 30-31:

And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

It’s beginning. The people whom Moses feared would reject him who would question this “I AM” from whom they haven’t heard a peep in four hundred years, hear the word of the Lord, they believe, and they worship. They trust in him as they realise that he has seen their affliction and is now prepared to act on their behalf.

Now, what does all this mean for us. For all its difficulties this is a rich passage. First, it reminds us that God’s people are his sons and daughters and that he is our Father. Some people struggle with that because of bad earthly fathers. We need to remember that rather than measuring God by the character of our earthly fathers is to get it backwards. We’re to measure our earthly fathers by the character of our perfect heavenly Father. Our earthly fathers are sinners, just as we are. In whatever ways they model good fatherhood, they are faithful to God and reveal his heavenly fatherhood, but it will always be, at best, imperfect.

But being sons and daughters comes with obligations and responsibilities. The Lord has delivered us from bondage, but he has done so that we might serve him—that we might be the men and women he created us to be. Freedom is not an end in itself. We were created to be our Father’s image bearers and, through Jesus, he has restored us to that vocation. This is—in at least one sense—what “covenant” is about. The Lord has delivered us and made us his people; we now have an obligation to be the people he’s freed us to be. Israel struggled and repeatedly failed, which is why the Lord promised that a new covenant would one day be made in which he would deal with the heart problem of his people. He would give his own Spirit to indwell his people, turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh; taking his law, which in those days was external and written on tablets of stone, but now writing it on the hearts of his people—changing and renewing our affections and desires, turning us to him and making us holy from the inside out.

And, third, as the passage points us to the importance of our covenant union with the Father, it reminds us of the vital importance of the covenant’s signs. In the Old Covenant those signs were circumcision and Passover. Circumcision, in particular, marked out God’s people as his own. It embodied the Lord’s covenant promise and to receive it, as I said earlier, was to take hold of that promise in faith. Baptism serves the same purpose in the New Covenant. It embodies God’s covenant promise of deliverance and new life in Christ. It is the mark that declares us sons and daughters of God. It is not optional. God has not given any other means of appropriating his promise. We do not take hold of Jesus, we do not become Christians by saying prayers or filling out cards or walking down aisles. We do so only by passing through the waters of baptism in faith. The same goes for our children. Dedicating

them to the Lord is wonderful. There’s even Old Testament precedent for that. But those children dedicated to the Lord in the Old Testament were first circumcised and ours must first be baptised. If we doubt the imperative covenant parents have to include our children in the Lord’s covenant by giving them the signs of that covenant, we need only look to Moses. The Lord wrestled him to a standstill, holding him in a deadly headlock, because he had neglected to include his son in the covenant. It’s a serious thing. Moses neglected his obligation to the Lord for the sake of peace with his wife. John Calvin writes, “This false dealing was no light offence, since nothing is more intolerable than to defraud God of his due obedience, in order to please men.”¹ How often is that true of us? For us it’s probably not an issue of forsaking God’s sacraments, but how often are we disobedient in other ways because we’d rather keep the peace in our relationships or with the world, rather than stir up trouble or make offense? How often do we go along in silence with the world’s ways rather than take a stand for what is right? How often do we let ourselves get caught up worshipping the idols of our day: money, power, sex, and self rather than serving God and God alone? How often do we neglect our duty to proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus because we don’t want to offend people or rock the boat?

Brothers and Sisters, we need to remember that God has given his Son for our sake. That Jesus became human for our sake and died for our sake, that we might, through his gracious sacrifice, be sons and daughters of God. He has freed us for one purpose: to restore us to our original vocation of service to him. Our Baptism reminds us of our covenantal commitment to our Father. And sometimes it’s easy to look at that obligation, to forget that we were once

slaves to sin and death, and to see it as a life-long slog. The pursuit of holiness is not an easy thing. Daily commitment to Jesus and his Church is not an easy thing. Daily prayer and daily Bible study is not an easy thing. Faithfulness in raising covenant children is not an easy thing. Being a herald, called to proclaim the good news about Jesus is not an easy thing. Like the Israelites, some days we foolishly long for the fleshpots of Egypt, for the days of our former captivity. But, Brothers and Sisters, we then come each week to the Lord’s Table—to this second sacrament. Baptism commits us to the Lord, but when we come to his Table we are reminded of us commitment to us. Here, we’re reminded of the cost of his commitment. He gave the life of his own Son for our sake. And here his Son meets us in the bread and in the wine, he pulls God’s future of new creation into the present and gives us a taste of the great feast that awaits. Here he restores our sense of gratitude and our once again gives us hope for the future. And here Jesus reminds us that, in the meantime, he himself, will give us the strength to persevere no matter how hard the day may be. Here he reminds us that the great I AM is with us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you have delivered us from our bondage to sin and death and have, through our union with Jesus, made us your sons and daughters. Remind us of our obligations to you, but remind us also of your gracious mercies to us that we would serve you, not with resentment, but with gratitude, with joy, and with hope. Amen.

¹ *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), page 106.