

Awaiting Deliverance
Exodus 5:1-23
November 30, 2025

Sitting in this room last Sunday evening—in front of food and across from some of you—the conversation turned to the providence of the Lord. As a few of us talked about that subject, and considered decades past, each of us admitted that time and time again we did *not* anticipate what was going to happen next in our lives. Try as we might to control factor after factor, surprises came.

And yet *there* we were, eating together, thanking God for His providence, mysterious as it is.

That conversation reminded me of something Wendell Berry wrote: “If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line - starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error . . . (and then) take the King's Highway past the appropriately named dangers, toils, and snares, and finally cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circling or a doubling back. . . Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises.”¹

I assume you hear Berry's allusion to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. And it's an apt reference, because in *that* book the main character Christian is on a journey. On that journey, *out* of the City of Destruction, Evangelist tells him to go toward the light. He obeys. But before he reaches the Wicket Gate, *long* before the Celestial City, Christian is led into the slough of despond. While there, someone asks him, “Where are you?” He responds, “Truly, I do not know.”²

Christian headed in the right direction. And yet something unexpected comes about. Bunyan dramatized that reality. Berry talked about it.³ So did some saints in white plastic chairs at a Thanksgiving meal last week. Maybe you too have done the right thing, seemingly, and the right thing—the thing you expected—did *not* come about. Or maybe you've headed in the right direction, and just around the bend was something *not* on the previously studied map.

Doug Stuart writes about Moses in Exodus 5: “What Moses eventually learned, all believers have had to learn for themselves: God's timing only sometimes coincides with our expectations.”⁴ Today's passage is, largely, about expectations—both wrong ones and unmet ones. And it shows us how we often respond to those surprises—particularly the temptation to doubt.

1. Pharaoh Doubts the Lord's Power (vv. 1–5)

To quickly catch us up, in chapter 3 the LORD appeared to Moses on a mountain in a bush ablaze but not consumed. He told Moses His Name. And He told Moses what He was going to do, that is, deliver His people from the power of the Egyptians (3:8). And *then* He told Moses *how* He planned to bring that deliverance about. In Exodus 3:10, God speaks to him: **Come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt** (3:10).

Moses balks. And then he balks some more. He's *so* hesitant that he asks, in *last* week's text, if God might send someone else (4:13). As you recall, the anger of the LORD then burned against Moses. He sends Aaron *with* Moses. And they go together to the elders of Israel, to speak to them

¹ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 133.

² John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 9.

³ Lewis also wrestled with it in *The Silver Chair*.

⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 169.

the words **the LORD had spoken to Moses** (4:30). They do the signs the LORD told them to do. And as the Lord predicted (3:18), the people hear, believe, and worship (4:31).

More happens than that summary, but that does catch us up somewhat. Chapter 5 then begins: **And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh.** Over the next nine chapters there will be encounter after encounter between Moses and this Pharaoh. But this is the first.

But before we get into what's said, we might *quickly* be reminded what Pharaoh represented. Functionally, he's the supreme court, the highest authority in that land. And not *just* humanly speaking. With the cobra on his crown, he was considered to be omnipotent, ruling the land as a god.⁵ I say all that to say that more is going on here than merely a face-off between these men.

Yet, to Pharaoh, and to *all* he represents, Moses brings a message. Verse 1 goes on: **Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel."** Moses and Aaron know this isn't *just* between them. They are acting, and speaking, in the Name that had been revealed to them—as Yahweh's mouthpiece.

As you likely know, "Thus says the LORD" is used by the prophets throughout the Old Testament.⁶ Moses, the paradigm prophet,⁷ uses the phrase first. Before the Lord uses him to deliver a people, the Lord uses him to deliver a message. Verse 1: **Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'"**

The Lord had told Moses back in chapter 3 to say something *almost* exactly like this (3:18). The Lord then told Moses how Pharaoh would respond. Verse 2 of chapter 5 confirms it: **But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?"** As you might surmise, this is an entirely different "Who are you?" question than the one Moses asked before the bush. In this case, Pharaoh's "Who are you?" is "Who do you think you are?" He's denying that the One speaking has the status to make demands of him.⁸

Another aspect of his question is emphasis on the pronoun, "I." It's **who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?** In other words, "Does 'he' not know who *I* am? Does 'he' not know my claim to divine royalty, sovereignty, and power, that I represent a god of Egypt?"⁹ Without fully realizing all he's saying, Pharaoh acknowledges—at least to some degree—that this meeting isn't merely about him and Moses. But in his mind, *he* is the one that brooks no rival.

And then Pharaoh acknowledges what is patently clear to us, in verse 2b: **I do not know the LORD.** And because of that, he says: **and besides I will not let Israel go.** Though he's quite aware of his *own* power, might, and rule, he's unaware of Yahweh's.

In a few chapters, that will no longer be the case. But at this point it's key that we do not lose sight of the identity of the primary combatants. The God of the Hebrews confronts the gods of Egypt.¹⁰

There's some debate on what Moses does next. Standing before this ruthless king, does he go off-script? And does he do so because the moment overwhelms him? It's certainly possible. Because his posture does become more subservient, and his tone moves from command to polite request.¹¹ Hear verse 3: **Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God,**

⁵ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 110; John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, 93.

⁶ Jeffery Leonard, *The Preacher's Hebrew Companion to Exodus 1:1–15:21*, 172.

⁷ Stuart, 160.

⁸ Leonard, 173.

⁹ Ryken, 110.

¹⁰ Stuart, 159.

¹¹ Leonard, 177; Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 118.

otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword. That last phrase surely seems off-script. Because when Pharaoh refuses and pestilence falls, it does *not* fall on Moses and Aaron.

We saw *hints* of Moses's flaws back in chapter 2. We saw more of them last week, as the Lord's anger burned against Moses. And we're seeing again *today* that in Exodus 5 Moses isn't the lion-hearted Moses of Exodus 14.

Further, keep in mind the human author of Exodus. There are all kinds of sentences, all kinds of conversations, all kinds of moments that Moses could've *skipped*, but he's telling the people of Israel, and us, that God was *still* being made known to him as well. Yahweh is *with* Moses. Who could be against him? (Rom. 8:31). And yet Moses still cowers.

So, Pharaoh strikes, in verse 4: **But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get back to your labors! Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!"** By his own admission, Pharaoh does not know the Lord. He's unmoved by Moses and Aaron's command. And he's *certainly* not going to kowtow to their seeking of sympathy.

In fact, rather than removing *any* burden, unshackling Israel from anything, he'll do the opposite.

2. Israel Doubts the Lord's Servants (vv. 6–21)

Verse 6: **So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying, "You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves."**

I was talking to some guys this week about this passage, in particular how it reminded me of the walkway out front.¹² I don't know if you've ever worried about the strength of that walkway, but the foreman told me one day that we could land a plane on it if we ever needed to. In large part, that's because underneath that concrete is a layer of gravel, and then *within* the concrete—inside it—is quite a bit of steel rebar (reinforcing bar) connecting and binding the whole slab together.

I bring it up because a number of commentators compared straw in ancient mudbricks to rebar in modern concrete.¹³ That is, it's a *stronger* material that reinforces and distributes stress across the structure, keeping the primary material from cracking. Today, rebar does that in concrete. Straw used to do it for bricks.

So, to begin our thinking on this section, we should see the *essential* nature of straw for bricks. And then we should keep in mind what we've *already* noted in chapter 1, how the Pharaoh had **made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks** (1:14). And as we note their lives previously being bitter *because* of that hard labor, we should know *that* description was when they were *given* straw.

But now, at this point, their supply has been cut off (v. 7). They'd have to find it themselves, which would take even more time and effort. Which would *certainly* mean their daily goals would be lessened, right? Verse 7 continues: **let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it.** Tolkien has a chapter in *The Hobbit* called "Out of the Frying-Pan and Into the Fire." As you might guess, it's a chapter where things go from bad to worse. That's precisely what happens here.

¹² I don't have a ton of construction experience, but I did watch them build that outside my window every day for a few *months*—if you recall.

¹³ Leonard, 184.

And *why* was Pharaoh doing this? Verse 8 tells us why he's taking away their straw but not their quota: **because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, "Let us go and sacrifice to our God."** Pharaoh's crystal clear. They are being punished *because of* the request made by Moses and Aaron. In fact, Pharaoh gives more work *so that* the Hebrews will stop listening to these two men. Verse 9: **Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words.**

I'm confident the goals were *already* out of reach—inhumane even. But that unreasonable burden is now made heavier. And what Pharaoh declared to the taskmasters is then told to the workers themselves. Verse 10: **So the taskmasters of the people and their foremen went out and spoke to the people, saying, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I am not going to give you any straw. You go and get straw for yourselves wherever you can find it, but none of your labor will be reduced.'" So the people scattered through all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.**

The "stubble for straw" bit is something I'd never seen before in this text. "Stubble" is a different word than "straw," referring to that portion of the plant that was left protruding from the ground *after* the straw was cut with a sickle—stubble is the short remaining stalks.¹⁴ So, if you're asking, "Can it get *worse*?" the answer is clear. Not *only* do they have to gather their own straw, at this point—in *this* season—the full stalk would be hard to find. So, they're left to scavenging, something hinted at even back in verse 11, **You go and get straw for yourselves wherever you can find it.**

They're looking for what's hard to find, and when they do find it, it's a lesser material.¹⁵ Nonetheless, verse 13: **The taskmasters pressed them, saying, "Complete your work quota, your daily amount, just as when you had straw." Moreover, the foremen of the sons of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, "Why have you not completed your required amount either yesterday or today in making brick as previously?"**

Most believe the taskmasters in this passage were Egyptian. But, underneath those taskmasters—the foremen mentioned here—were Israelites.¹⁶ So, after Pharaoh gave the decree, the Egyptian taskmasters made the demands clear. And probably because they couldn't punish *every* Hebrew for falling short, day after day, they singled out the foremen from God's people and beat them.

Why is this in here? First, as we've said, the deliverance of the Lord is not necessarily in a straight line, at least from our perspective. And, yet, because we know what happens later in Exodus, we're reminded that *not* going in a straight line does *not* mean the destination is any different.

But also, if the entire book is about God making Himself known—in part as Deliverer—then we might see pictured here the cruel nature of sin as taskmaster, what it means to be enslaved to it. In one of my favorite albums to listen to this time of year, the songwriter pens, "Our enemy, our captor, is no Pharaoh on the Nile. Our toil is neither mud, nor brick, nor sand. Our ankles bear no callouses from chains, yet Lord, we're bound. Imprisoned here, we dwell in our own land. Deliver us. Oh, Yahweh, hear our cry."¹⁷

He hears. In fact, in one of my favorite passages to *read* this time of year, the angel says to Joseph about his soon-to-be born Son, in Matthew 1:21: **He will save His people from their sins.** As you consider that, note that the angel doesn't say, "He will merely save from the *punishment* due them because of their sin, or merely from the wrath of God *against* their sin," but that He will save **from their sins**. Chuck Quarles writes that it's almost as if the angel personifies these sins,

¹⁴ Alexander, 122.

¹⁵ Stuart, 165.

¹⁶ Leonard, 183; Stuart, 163.

¹⁷ Andrew Peterson, "Deliver Us"

“portraying them as enemy combatants who have captured people and keep them as hostages or slaves.”¹⁸ And that’s precisely what sin *is*, and *does*.¹⁹ And yet this newborn has come to rescue His people, from the punishment due them, from the wrath of God. But also—into the core of humanity’s malady—He will save from the enslavement that sin brings into their lives.²⁰ He saves to the uttermost.

It bears saying, simply, that the Hebrew enslavement was worse than you’ve ever imagined it to be. These Hebrews don’t meet their quotas. They *couldn’t* have. Yet the foremen are beaten. And they cry out. Verse 15: **Then the foremen of the sons of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, “Why do you deal this way with your servants? There is no straw given to your servants, yet they keep saying to us, ‘Make bricks!’ And behold, your servants are being beaten; but it is the fault of your own people.”**

Maybe the foremen thought, for one reason or another, that the lack of straw was merely something of a supply issue.²¹ That’s *not* the case, according to verse 17: **But he said, “You are lazy, very lazy; therefore you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ So go now and work; for you will be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks.”**

We’re not sure how they processed the earlier edicts. It seems possible that the taskmasters had earlier passed the message from Pharaoh *along* to the foremen. But *now*, the foremen hear it for themselves. They see the look in Pharaoh’s eye. And verse 19: **The foremen of the sons of Israel saw that they were in trouble because they were told, “You must not reduce your daily amount of bricks.”**

They’d heard it, maybe secondhand. Now they are told it—face to face. *And* they hear the *why*. From Pharaoh’s lips they heard that the straw being taken away, and the beatings that ensued after unmet quotas were because Moses and Aaron asked if the Hebrews might go and sacrifice to the Lord.

And in verse 20 those men don’t seem to be far away: **When they left Pharaoh’s presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting for them.**²² The foremen come out, see Moses and Aaron, and give their report. Verse 21: **They said to them, “May the LORD look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh’s sight and in the sight of his servants to put a sword in their hand to kill us.”**

Pharaoh doubts the Lord’s power. And now the people of Israel are doubting the Lord’s servants. Which leads to . . .

3. Moses Doubts the Lord Himself (vv. 22–23)

Verse 22: **Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, “O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people?”**

To start with the positive, Moses does go *to the Lord* with his complaint. Moses had met Him on Mount Horeb. The Lord told him that He would deliver His people. He told Moses *his* role in that deliverance. He’d *even* told Moses that there would be difficulty. From the bush, Moses heard that the king would not let the Hebrews go (3:19). Moses had been told that Pharaoh’s heart would be hardened (4:21).

¹⁸ Charles Quarles, *Matthew*, EGGNT, 21.

¹⁹ Sin’s a pain pill laced with fentanyl.

²⁰ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 3.

²¹ Ryken, 156.

²² It almost sounds like some co-workers waiting outside the boss’s office to hear what the boss told you.

With that in mind, Moses should *not* have expected this deliverance to go smoothly. And yet—like us—he seems to struggle through the actual details of the difficulty. It’s one thing to say, “This is going to be hard.” It’s another thing to actually live through it, to look the foremen in the eye, to see their stripes, and to be blamed for their beatings. Right? It’s one thing to be told by the Lord that we will suffer. It’s quite *another* to actually walk through it.

So, after the foremen blame Moses, Moses assigns blame, asking why the Lord had brought harm to this people.²³ By the way, “harm” is the same term Moses will use in verse 23 to speak of what Pharaoh does to the Hebrews.²⁴ The charge Moses makes is not a small charge.

And then Moses has *another* question, one less focused on the sons of Israel and more focused on him. Verse 22 goes on: **Why did You ever send me?** After years of putting down roots in Midian, he’d uprooted his family (4:20) and gone back into the land he’d fled from, to face the crown that sought to murder him when he was only a baby. Of course, he’d done all this because he’d been sent by Yahweh. At this point, he asks, “Why?”

Verse 23 continues: **Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people.** “Ever since” seems to indicate that what’s unfolded in our verses today has taken some time.²⁵ This isn’t a week of burden bearing, a week of burdens becoming heavier, nor a week of being blamed by his own people for things going from bad to worse. It’s week after week, burdens growing heavier and heavier, and the blame for *all* of it being cast at his feet.

He continues: **“Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all.”** This is stated in absolute terms, as in “you most certainly have not delivered.”²⁶

So, while *last* week’s text ended with the people of Israel worshipping God for His soon deliverance, by the end of *this* week’s text, Moses has moved from hopefulness to resentment to doubt.²⁷

Conclusion

Moses writes all this down for a generation to come. He’s not afraid to tell them that he struggled with understanding God’s timing.²⁸

He’d done the right thing; and yet, the right thing had not come about, at least not *yet*. He’d headed the right direction, and yet around the bend was something he’d not seen on the map.²⁹ The deliverance he’d been promised hadn’t come as quickly as expected. That’s the story of God’s people, here in Exodus. This is also the story of God’s people, at the close of the Old Testament. And this is often also *our* story, as we struggle with God’s timing in one way or another.

And yet the delays, and even Moses’s flaws in responding to those delays, are here for another purpose. In fact, *every* detail in the Exodus story is preparing us to long for a better Deliverer. One who wouldn’t say, as in *last* week’s text, “send someone else.” One who wouldn’t, like *this* week’s text, cower before the pseudo-power of a human ruler. One who wouldn’t doubt the One who sent Him for a moment. Instead, One who over and over again entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly,³⁰ even when it meant He would suffer, in order that He might deliver.

²³ Stuart, 168.

²⁴ Leonard, 206.

²⁵ Stuart, 168.

²⁶ Leonard, 196.

²⁷ Stuart, 166.

²⁸ Stuart, 168.

²⁹ Though he’s headed to the land of promise, the path had first gone through the slough of despond.

³⁰ 1 Peter 2:23

