

Open your Bibles to Exodus 4:18-23.

- We're continuing our study of the book of Exodus.
- This morning we will read of the beginning of Moses' journey back to Egypt and God's further instruction to him.
- And we'll be considering God's love for His People and His sovereignty over our enemies.

In our text today, God is going to reiterate to Moses, in broad terms, what his mission is:

- He is to go to Pharaoh and speak to him on behalf of God.
- He is to perform various miracles/wonders before Pharaoh as proofs that God really is speaking through Moses.
- And, as God said earlier, Pharaoh is not going to listen. He's not going to let the Israelites go. Not at first.
- But then God will tell Moses something that He hadn't yet: Pharaoh isn't going to let them go because God is going to harden Pharaoh's heart.
- And that means that God is in control of the entire situation with Pharaoh.
- Pharaoh will really rebel and disobey God's command to him. He will truly sin and be guilty for it.
- And it is God who controls it all. Pharaoh's rebellion is his own. And it is also for God's own purposes.

God will also give Moses a message for Pharaoh:

- "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."
- And in this threat, in these strong, terrifying words to

Pharaoh, God reveals His great love for His People.

Brothers and sisters, I hope to remind you today just how much God loves His Church of which you are members through faith in Christ.

- The Church is God's son, in a sense. We are adopted through His eternally begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

- And because we are His, because He is our Father, He loves us with a ferocious love.

- He loves us with a love that is awesome and astonishing for us, and at the same time terrifying for our enemies.

- And because He loves us, He reigns over all our enemies and will crush them in due time, as He wills, for our good and for His glory.

He loves you, Christian. He loves you individually.

- And He also loves His Church corporately.

- And these things are a great cause for rejoicing.

- May God bless the preaching of His Word today.

If you would, and are able, please stand with me for the reading of the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God.

Exodus 4:18-23

[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."

[19] And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are

dead.”

[20] 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.

[21] 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.

[22] Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son,

[23] 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.”

(PRAY)

Heavenly Father,

- *You’ve made all believers into your children.*
- *And we’ve gathered to hear a word from our Father.*
- *And so we ask that you would speak to us today from your Word.*
- *By your Spirit who dwells within us, work in us today to conform us to the image of your Son, Jesus Christ.*
- *Grant us faith to believe what you’ve said. Grant us soft hearts to receive your truth.*
- *And make us rejoice in your promises and the love you’ve shown us in our Lord Jesus.*
- *We ask these things in Jesus’ Name and for His sake.*
- *Amen.*

1.) God has finished His conversation with Moses

at the Burning Bush.

- And now Moses begins his journey back to Egypt.

But Moses can't just up-and-leave. He has responsibilities he has to tend to.

•He has a family he'll be taking with him. And he has a father-in-law that he needs to talk to first.

•And so, before Moses left, he “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.’”

•This would've been pretty standard in that day. This is the proper way to leave: Ask permission from the head of the family.

•Moses has to go because God commanded it. So this is more polite than it is an actual request for permission.

•But, nevertheless, this is right for Moses to do. Jethro has given him a daughter in marriage. He's given Moses a job for decades and helped to take care of him while he was in a foreign land.

•And so, it's good that Moses got Jethro's blessing to leave.

Catch this: Moses, the great man of God, still shows great respect to his father-in-law.

•He honors his father here. He gives respect to whom respect is due.

•Know this, Christian: Just because you're in a position of leadership or are being used mightily by God, you are still to exercise humility and show honor to whom it is due.

Moses tells Jethro that he wants to see if his

brothers are still alive.

- This isn't a lie. He is going to see if the Israelites are still alive. He just leaves out that he's also going to free them.

- This might be an act of wisely concealing information so that Jethro doesn't worry about Moses taking his daughter and grandchildren back to Egypt.

- And so, Jethro gives his blessing for Moses to leave.

But then it seems that maybe Moses was dragging his feet to go to Egypt.

- And so God speaks to him in Midian and said, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."

- God had already told him to go back. But apparently he hadn't yet. So God tells him again.

- But God also tells him something new: Everyone who wanted to kill you for your killing the Egyptian IS DEAD.

- Maybe it was Moses' fear of reprisals when he got back there that was part of the reason he resisted God's call initially.

- So God tells him that the way ahead is safe. God has prepared the way. Moses can return safely now.

This would've been a great encouragement to Moses to go.

- And it may have also served as something of sign that the Exodus had already begun.

- Catch this: Those who would've prevented Moses, God's chosen deliverer, from being in Egypt are DEAD. So then, Moses can go back.

- This means that stage one of the Exodus (Moses'

return to Egypt) is ready to go. God has paved the way.

- And this means that more help from God, more way-making lies ahead. Freedom is on the horizon.

- So, Moses, his wife, and two sons set out for Egypt.

And in v21, God spoke again to Moses:

- “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power...”

- Now, Moses has already been commissioned to do signs/miracles/wonders before the ISRAELITES to confirm his being sent from God.

- But now he’s told that he will also do wonders before Pharaoh. (This is new information for him.)

Now, these miracles mentioned are not the three from vv1-9. (Staff to serpent, leprous hand, water to blood.)

- Those three miracles are for the Israelites.

- So the miracles mentioned here are a reference to the plagues/wonders that God will do through Moses during his time in Egypt.

- God has already hinted at these in 3:20 when He said, “So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the WONDERS that I will do in it...”

- Furthermore, Moses does not perform before Pharaoh all three of the signs he does before the Israelites. He only does two of them before Pharaoh.

- So that tells us that God is speaking of more wonders that Moses has been empowered to do, but just doesn’t know it yet because God hasn’t commanded them to be done.

- In time, God will tell him what the wonders to perform

before Pharaoh are.

So Moses will do miracles/wonders before Pharaoh.

- And these are meant to signify that power beyond that of mere human beings is at work in Moses.
- They're meant to declare to Pharaoh and all Egypt that GOD is with Moses. And therefore, it is GOD, the God of the Hebrews, who is commanding Pharaoh to free the Israelites.
- We'll get into this more in coming weeks, but the plagues will blatantly declare God's sovereignty over Pharaoh, Egypt, and all their false gods.
- In these plagues, God will glorify Himself and make His name great in all the earth as the nations see what ruin He has brought to the greatest nation on earth.

But that's not all that God tells Moses.

- He goes on to say, "But I will harden his (*Pharaoh's*) heart, so that he will not let the people go."
- This verse is one of the most controversial in the book of Exodus.
- And it also contains one of the most repeated concepts in Exodus: The hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

But what does it mean that God will "harden his heart?"

- The heart stands for the whole intellect, will, emotions, etc. The inner life of the person. Everything from which a person acts.
- And "harden his heart" can be translated "strengthen his heart." (It can also be translated "make his heart

heavy.”)

- This is sometimes said in a positive sense. But here it's obviously negative.

- And it means something like “to strengthen/increase the resolve of someone.”

- God is going to strengthen Pharaoh's resolve to not listen to Moses and refuse to let the Israelites go.

- Pharaoh is going to act contrary to God's commands. And God is going to strengthen his resolve to continue in his disobedience.

This is a JUDGMENT upon Pharaoh for his sin.

- Pharaoh's heart is ALREADY hard against God.

- How do we know that? Because Pharaoh is a SINNER.

- He, like all natural mankind, was born in sin, delights in sin, and is a slave to sin.

- Romans 8:7, speaking of all unconverted sinners, says, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is HOSTILE TO GOD, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot.”

- This is the mind that Pharaoh has. It is a mind that is hostile to God from birth.

- So for God to harden Pharaoh's heart means that God is not going to grant Pharaoh repentance from his sin.

- God is not going to change Pharaoh's heart by His grace.

- Instead, God is going to hand him over to his own sinful desires and refuse to change him.

- And in doing this, God will judicially harden his heart, and grant him power/resolve to continue to rebel, as Pharaoh wants to do.

And before you begin to think that this is unfair of God, I want to remind you that God is NOT OBLIGATED to be gracious to ANYONE.

- God is well within His rights to hand someone over to their sin and not grant them repentance.

- Grace cannot be demanded or it is no longer grace.

- And, really, this is what God does to all those who are not His Elect: He leaves them in their sin, hands them over to it, and so they are hardened against Him and continue in sin without repentance until death.

- And He is just to do so because this is what sinners deserve.

- Nobody deserves His grace. Grace, by definition, cannot be deserved, owed, or obligated.

- So when God grants a sinner repentance and faith in Christ and so saves him, that is an act of pure, amazing grace from a kind God who saves the undeserving.

- (For more on this, read Romans 9.)

Now, let me clarify something:

- God will harden Pharaoh's heart. But at the same time, we will read in subsequent chapters that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

- Again, his heart is already hard. He doesn't want to obey God. So God is going to give him power and courage to continue to do what he wants to do.

- But listen: God will not force Pharaoh to do anything that Pharaoh doesn't want to do.

- He doesn't want to repent. He doesn't want to free the Israelites.

- He is a sinner who is at enmity with God. And so, he

does not want to submit to God's demand through Moses.

- So, God will leave him that way. God will give Pharaoh over to do exactly what he wants to do. And God will refuse to grant him repentance.

Now, at this point, some will ask: "Doesn't this mean that sinners aren't responsible for their sin?"

- Answer: NOT AT ALL.
- The sinner is always accountable to God for his actions.
- To say otherwise is to contradict the Scriptures.
- God will hold Pharaoh accountable. And God is righteous and just. Therefore, Pharaoh is really responsible for his sin.
- God's sovereignty doesn't negate human accountability or responsibility before God.
- Now, we might not be able to fully unravel or explain how all of this works. But the Word of God teaches both God's sovereignty over men and their sins and also man's responsibility before God.
- And so, we must believe and embrace both truths at the same time or we are guilty of rejecting what God has said.
- Don't ever be so arrogant as to say that something can't be true simply because you don't understand it.
- If God says something is true, it's true regardless of whether or not we can explain it.
- So we must submit to God's Word on this issue.

See this: God's hand governs this entire thing.

- Pharaoh will rebel, yes. He will refuse, yes. He will

continue to enslave and oppress the Israelites, yes.

- But all of this is NOT APART from the will of God.
- Pharaoh will sin, as he wants to do. And at the same time, Pharaoh will not do a single thing that God hasn't willed/ordained to be done.

•As Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He will."

God is in control of this whole thing.

- Pharaoh will refuse. Plagues will come. Horrible things will happen.
- But God controls it all. So the People will be freed.
- Even if it seems that Pharaoh has the upper hand and that his stubbornness will win the day, things are not always what they seem.

God will ensure that Pharaoh will not relent until God has revealed and glorified Himself exactly how HE wants to.

- No matter how bad things get for Egypt, God will make sure that nothing changes until HE SAYS SO.
- The decision to let the Israelites go isn't really up to Pharaoh, in the end. It's up to God.
- So no matter how bad things get in the meantime, Moses is to know that God is in charge.

But God not only tells Moses of His sovereignty, He also tells him what to say to Pharaoh.

- In vv22-23 we read, "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.”

Here we see God's love for His People.

- His People, Israel, are like a firstborn son to Him.
- This relationship is not new. Israel has a long relationship to God going back four hundred years to Abraham and God's covenant with him.
- They are corporately His son.
- Not a natural son, but an adopted son. Not having a natural relation to God, but a covenantal one.
- God sovereignly chose this nation to be His child. Of all the nations of the earth, God graciously chose to LOVE and CHOOSE this particular people, that they would belong to Him alone.
- He loves them more than any other nation in the world.
- He has promised them things that He has promised to no other nation.
- They are His in a way that no other nation is.
- All things belong to God. All nations belong to God. But this People is a special possession of God.
- He loves them as a father loves his firstborn son.

SO PHARAOH BETTER LET THEM GO!

- God loves Israel more than Egypt.
- God has a covenant with Israel, not Egypt.
- God's son is Israel, not Egypt.
- So what do you think God will do to Egypt who oppresses His son?
- What do you think God will do to the king who leads that oppression?

God tells Pharaoh exactly what He'll do:

•“If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will KILL YOUR FIRSTBORN SON.”

•God will kill Pharaoh's literal own firstborn son, as we will see later.

•But He will also strike the firstborn of the whole nation, seeing that Pharaoh as king is the “father” of Egypt.

•The punishment will fit the crime: If God's son is not freed but continues to be enslaved, oppressed, and killed, if Pharaoh will not give God His son, then God will take Pharaoh's son from him.

•Pharaoh's disobedience will result in horror and tragedy, as all unrepentant sin does.

But in this we see the great love of God for His covenant People.

•God's love is so great for His own that it is terrifying and threatens those who threaten His children.

•This is love, isn't it? Love protects. Love defends. Love has a great measure of wrath toward those who would hurt the loved one.

•Love always comes with a great measure of fury for any and all who threaten or harm the beloved.

•And God's People are beloved by Him as a father loves his firstborn son.

•And so, the wrath of God will descend like a whirlwind on Pharaoh if he refuses to free God's People.

And with this knowledge and message, Moses continues his journey to Egypt.

•God is sovereign. And God loves His People.

2.) Let's think about those things some more.

- First, this text reminds us that God is sovereign over the enemies of His People.
- God's control over Pharaoh reminds us of the fact that God rules over ALL His People's enemies.

Let me put it another way: THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM.

- Pharaoh would seem to be quite strong by his continued opposition to Moses and refusal to obey God.
- To those watching, Pharaoh would seem to be strong and in control of things.
- To those watching, it would seem like Pharaoh had the upper hand in this contest because he continued to oppress the Israelites, in spite of God's command.
- As the plagues come, Pharaoh may look like a fool because the nation suffers, but in other ways it would seem like Pharaoh was still in charge because, no matter what the God of the Hebrews did, Pharaoh still wouldn't do as He commanded.
- But things are not always what they seem.

For those who know the Living God, would know that all of this was in His hands.

- God ordained it. He oversaw it.
- God controlled whether or not Pharaoh would listen.
- God controlled Pharaoh's heart, ultimately.
- And God was allowing Pharaoh to resist. He could change it in a moment. But He wouldn't.
- Why? Because in the right way, at the right time, God was going to crush Pharaoh spectacularly.
- God was going to get glory over Pharaoh in all of this.

Israel would be in slavery for exactly how long God wanted them to be in that state.

- Pharaoh would have the strength to continue in rebellion for exactly as long as God desired him to do so.
- And God would overturn it all at the exact time that He willed.
- Pharaoh may look mighty for a time. But things are not always what they seem.

Brothers and sisters, the enemies of Christ's Church might seem to have the upper hand.

- And throughout history, they often do.
- God's People have been and are oppressed throughout the world. And the enemies of His Church seem strong.
- We look at places like China, North Korea, India, Iran, Afghanistan, and many countries in Africa, and we see our brothers and sisters torn to pieces for Christ's sake.
- We look even in our own land, in our Western culture and we see, though much lesser, forms of persecution of God's Church.
- Some of us, looking down the road of the next century, see that, barring a great revival from God, the Church in America will probably suffer greatly.
- And as we see these things and think about the future, the enemies of the Church seem strong. They seem big. They are defiant. They set themselves against God and His Christ.
- And they seem to be winning. Our enemies are more numerous than we are. They have the power. We don't.

Things seem to be out of control for us.

•Our enemies say, “Where is their God? I do not know their God. I do not fear their God. These people are nothing. Their God is nothing. We reign. We do as we please.”

•And it looks that way sometimes, doesn't it? And sometimes we believe it, too.

•But things are not always what they seem.

The enemies of Christ's Church are only doing exactly what God has willed to be done.

•It is all in the Hand of God. It is all according to His foreordained, good, holy plan.

•He is hardening and softening hearts as He wills.

•The nations do not reign. Our enemies do not reign.

•OUR GOD REIGNS. And so, they do nothing that He does not allow them to do.

•They have no power or ability to do their will apart from Him. He is allowing them to do as they do.

And that means that, as with Pharaoh, God is raising them up so that He might crush them into the dirt in due time.

•Whether it be by converting grace or judgment unto damnation, He will crush the enemies of His People.

Take heart Christian: Things are not always what they seem.

•The world and the devil may seem to have the upper hand. But it's only because God is permitting it FOR NOW.

- Catch that. Don't miss it: FOR NOW. Not for always.
- Just as Pharaoh would eventually bow the knee to God and free His People, our enemies will one day do the same in one way or another.
- And the suffering Church will be the victorious Church.
- How? Because the God who reigns over the hearts of men, the God who is sovereign over all things will bring to it pass His way, in His time, for His glory and our good.

And why will He do this?

- Because He loves His People and will not permit our suffering to continue forever.
- And that brings us to our next point.

3.) Brothers and sisters, GOD FEROCIOUSLY LOVES HIS PEOPLE.

- He calls them His "firstborn son."
- Now, I know some of you may be thinking, "He was saying that about Israel. But we're not Israel. We're the Church. We're not Jews. We're Christians."
- And that's right. We're not ethnic Israel. We're not ethnic Jews.
- But we are the true Israel. We are spiritual Israel. We are Jews not outwardly, but inwardly. We are the People of God.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you know that Israel was a type, a foreshadowing, a pointer, to the Church.

- OT texts about Israel are applied to the Church in the

NT:

- In 1 Peter 2:9 we read, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy NATION, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

- All of that is language from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah that was about Israel but is now applied to the Church.

- In Galatians 6:16, Paul calls the Church “the Israel of God.”

- All throughout Galatians, Paul tells us that Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe.

- And in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul calls the Jews in the Exodus “OUR FATHERS.” Though we are not ethnic Jews, the Israelites are our fathers.

- Take all of this together and we see that we are the true, spiritual Israel that the earthly nation pointed to and anticipated.

And so, Israel’s adoption as God’s son points to our adoption to Him as sons in Jesus Christ.

- Every person who trusts in Christ has been adopted by God into His Family through Christ.

- Jesus is the true Son of God. The eternal Son of God. And by faith in Him, by virtue of our union with Him, we are brought into God’s Family.

- Hear that: We are adopted by God through God’s only begotten, eternal Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

- We are God’s children. We are His sons individually in Christ. And we are His son, corporately, as the Church.

Hear the Word of God on this:

•“But to all who did receive Him (Jesus), who believed on His name, He gave the right to become children of God...” (John 1:12)

•“In love He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will...” (Ephesians 1:5)

•“...for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” (Galatians 3:26)

•“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

(1 John 3:1)

Jesus Christ has lived perfectly for our righteousness.

•He has suffered and died to pay the penalty for our sins.

•And He has been raised from the dead for our justification.

•By faith in Him we are forgiven of our sins and washed clean, made pure and holy, by His blood.

•By faith in Him, we have received His perfect righteousness that we might stand before God.

•And being cleansed and given a righteousness that will withstand the judgment of God, being made pure and holy by Christ, we have been made fit for adoption by the holy God.

•And being united to Christ, the Son, we are made into sons of God.

•God sent His Son to save us, and softened our hearts to convert us, and is working in our hearts to continue to change us “in order that He (Jesus) might be the

firstborn among many **brothers.**” (Romans 8:29)

And all of us being made sons of God individually, make up the Church corporately.

- And so, the Church is God’s son (lowercase “s”).
- So we rightfully see ourselves in God’s statement, “Israel is my firstborn son...”
- God loves His Church as a father loves his firstborn son.
- But I’ll go even further: Having been united to the Son of God by faith, God loves His Church as He loves His only begotten Son.
- And if God loved Israel, a mixed nation of believers and unbelievers, so much that He would kill Pharaoh’s firstborn, how much more does God love His Church, who is made up only of those whom He has personally adopted in Christ?

Christian, hear this: God loves His Church more than you know.

- And you are a member of His Church by faith in Christ.
- God is our Father. And our Father will take care of His children.
- He will be patient with His Church.
- He will love and forgive His Church always.
- He will ensure, in spite of the remaining corruption, weakness, failure, and sinfulness of His Church, that He always has a People in this world until Christ comes.

And He will, whether in time or eternity, crush all our enemies.

- Listen: I don't care what your eschatology is. We can all put our "amen" to this! He will crush all our enemies in one way or another!

- He will vindicate His Church as His son. He will not allow us to be oppressed forever.

- He will rise up at the right time and defend our cause and glorify Himself by striking down those who harm or would harm His Church!

There may be many Pharaohs who oppress God's People and refuse to heed His voice.

- Pharaohs think they run things, but God has hardened their hearts that He might get glory over them in due time.

- Pharaohs seem to have the upper hand, but things are not always what they seem.

- But Pharaohs are raised up to be struck down.

And why will God do this?

- Because we are His son through Jesus Christ.

- And He will not abide forever the mistreatment of His children.

- So let every oppressor of God's Church know that God says to them, "The Church is my son. And I will destroy its every enemy."

- He does not take lightly the mistreatment of His children. So we know that our vindication is coming.

God loves His Church. Know that, Christian.

- God so loves His Church that, not only will He judge all our enemies, but He gave His Son over to judgment in our place.

- The love of God for His Church is most clearly shown in that He gave His only begotten Son to make us sons.

Hear this: God would kill Pharaoh's son to set His earthly Israel free from bondage.

- But He crushed His own Son in order to set His spiritual Israel free from sin and judgment.

- Church, He loves you.

- No matter what you see in the world, no matter what you may suffer for Christ, look to the crucified Christ and know that God loves His People dearly.

4.) My dear friends, I want you to get these things in your hearts:

- God really loves His Church.

- All the suffering of the Church is under His control.

- Every enemy of the Church will one day be struck down by our Heavenly Father.

- And if you are in Christ, you are part of God's Church.

- He is your Father. You are His son.

May God grant us joy and peace as we lay hold of these truths by faith.

- Amen.