

**Setback**  
Exodus 5:1-23

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HDBC

**Are you familiar with Murphy's Law? *If anything can go wrong, it will.***

There are a number of sub-laws.

*If multiple things can go wrong they will go wrong in the worst possible order.*

*If there are two lines the one you did not pick will always move faster.*

*If it tastes good, it cannot be good for you.*

*If everything seems to be going well, you've obviously overlooked something.*

**In life** things seldom go as planned. **Setbacks** are inevitable. You can plan to **leave for that road trip** at a particular time and something will invariably cause a delay. If you pick up a baby the baby will immediately develop a runny nose. If you feel absolutely **confident about the test** the teacher will postpone it. As soon as you get your **car to the mechanic** it will suddenly run perfectly.

**Setbacks** are part of life. Moses certainly experienced his share of them. We see one in Exodus 5. Things have gone pretty well up to that point. He has been called of God to return to Egypt and lead his people to freedom. His brother, Aaron, has agreed to partner with him. They have traveled to Egypt and shared the plan with the Hebrew leaders. They believed Moses and were excited about what God was about to do. So far so good.

**Things changed quickly** when Moses and Aaron met with Pharaoh for the first time. Things went from good to bad. It should not have surprised Moses. God had repeatedly told him Pharaoh would not initially let them go. But Moses certainly seemed to be surprised by this turn of events. Let's look at the details.

### **1. The Request of Moses (1-3)**

This part of the narrative begins with the simple but bold request that Pharaoh let the people go for a **three-day trek into the wilderness**. The reason given; that they might worship God. There was nothing complicated about the request, but it must have been shocking to Pharaoh. He could not have imagined a more audacious request. But there it was. Moses and Aaron made it clear that **the Lord was the source of the request**. The God of the Hebrews was behind this. That would be a key to understanding Pharaoh's response.

## 2. The Response of Pharaoh (4-9)

Think about the dynamics of this encounter. Two foreigners walk into the office of the most powerful man in that part of the world and demand the release of his entire workforce. Pharaoh must have laughed out loud!

**His response** was predictable. **First**, because God had predicted it. **Second**, because he considered himself a god and would not be bullied by anyone, even another who claimed to be a god. **Third**, because the Hebrews were the engine that drove his economic success, much like slavery in the early centuries of American life. It was first and foremost **a moral issue**, but for many, it was an **economic issue**. Same with Pharaoh. Simply put, he said **No**. But let's look a little deeper into his response. His question to Moses was important.

***Who is this Lord that I should obey his voice?*** I'm not going to listen to anyone who claims to be God. This is important because it would lay the groundwork for the duel that would be fought between the true God of the Hebrews and the false gods of the Egyptians. **As J Vernon McGee points out, the plagues that God would use to force Pharaoh to let the people go were all directed at specific gods that were worshipped by the people.** We'll get more into that when we get to the plagues.

**Pharaoh's question** gets to the heart of the matter. Who is God? He did not know it but he was about to get an important but costly lesson in theology. He was about to enter into a showdown in which there could only be one winner. And the winner would not be Pharaoh.

**This is the key question every person needs to come to grips with.** Who is God. Atheists claim to believe in no god. Many unbelievers might not go that far, but fail to understand the person of God, just who He is.

**Basically**, Pharaoh offers a three-fold response.

- 1) I don't know who this god is. **Ignorance** of God
- 2) I don't yield to this god. **Defiance** of God
- 3) I don't respect this god or his people. **Attack** on God's people.

**He would** make it harder for them by taking away the supply of straw needed for making bricks. They would have to find and gather their own. Made it impossible for them to succeed. Led to more punishment. **He was throwing the first punch.** It would be futile. God never loses!

**By the way** we often see that same pattern with people today.

- 1) They don't know who God is. We need to tell them.
- 2) Some will not yield to the gospel. Need to pray for them.
- 3) Some attack believers and Christianity. Need to endure graciously.

### 3. The Burden on the People (10-18)

The text makes it clear that Pharaoh's orders were carried out. Things suddenly got much worse for the people. They were unable to meet the new demands. This led to Hebrew foremen being beaten and verbally harassed. Life suddenly got much worse than they thought it could ever get.

**Just when** it seemed that things were about to get good, they experienced a devastating new reality. It was a serious setback for them and Moses.

**The foremen** among the slaves appealed to Pharaoh for relief. **Cried out** (15) means to make an appeal that requests action & relief. They were not simply sharing their thoughts, they were begging for Pharaoh to reverse this new policy. He refused. **I want to make an observation here. They were right in seeking relief from someone who had the power to fix their situation, but they turned wrong person. Pharaoh was not their friend. He was the one oppressing them. They should have been crying out to God, not Pharaoh. Be careful where you seek relief.**

**So, what do you do** when setbacks happen. How do you handle it when you have a sense that deliverance is coming, but you are not yet experiencing it? I can tell you what the people did. **They took their eyes off of God and put their tongues in motion to complain.**

### 4. The Complaint to Moses (19-21)

They knew they were in trouble. **Trouble** (19) refers to *distress, injury, calamity*. This was a serious situation. They had been backed into a corner and there seemed to be no way out. So, they expressed their frustration with Moses and Aaron.

**How quickly** their perspective changed when things got tough. Before, they were worshipping God with Moses and believing that God was behind the actions of Moses. Now, they want God to judge Moses. Now they believed Moses was not acting on God's authority, but on his own. **So, what would Moses** do with their complaints? He did the right thing. He took it to God.

## 5. The Appeal to God (5:22-23)

Moses did the right thing in praying. I love the honesty in his prayer. It is not hard to sense a little frustration in Moses, as well as a little cynicism. He asks two **Why** questions, followed by an accusation.

**Why** have you brought hardship to the people? Concern for others.

**Why did you ever send me?** Concern for himself. Almost *I told you so!*

**You** have done nothing for the people. Accusing God of not caring.

**Keep in mind**, Moses was in **center of God's will**. If you think being in the will of God will insulate you from trouble, you are naïve, at best. He was right where he was supposed to be, and yet things seemed to be going horribly.

**Moses** began to question God's calling. He was making the same mistake the leaders of Israel had made. He took his eyes off of the promise of God and placed them squarely on the trouble before him. He assumed things had gone horrible wrong. In reality, they were going exactly as God planned.

**To human eyes** this was a major **setback**.

**From God's perspective** it was a grand **setup**.

Preparing the stage for the great drama that was about to unfold.

**Setbacks** often set the stage for God to work for our good and His glory.

So, here's an principle to remember.

What we perceive as a **setback** will often become a **setup** for a work of God.

God uses them to set the stage for the next grand thing that He is about to do.

In an article for *Leadership* journal, John Ortberg discusses how setbacks are necessary for our spiritual growth. He writes about a hypothetical exercise:

**Imagine that you have a child**, and for five minutes you're given a script of what will be that child's life. You get an eraser. You can edit it. You can take out whatever you want.

**You read** that your child will have a **learning disability** in grade school.

Reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be laborious for yours. **In high**

**school**, your kid will make a great circle of friends; then one of them will die of cancer.

**After high school** this child will actually get into the college they wanted to attend. While there, there will be a car crash, and your child will lose a leg and go through a difficult depression.

**A few years later**, your child will get a great job—then lose that job in an economic downturn. **Your child will get married**, but then go through the grief of separation.

**You get this script for your child's life** and have five minutes to edit it. Wouldn't you want to erase all the stuff that would cause them pain?

**I am part** of a generation of adults called "helicopter parents," because we're constantly trying to swoop into our kid's educational life, relational life, sports life, etc., to make sure no one is mistreating them, no one is disappointing them. We want them to experience one unobstructed success after another.

**One Halloween** a mom came to our door to trick or treat. Why didn't she send in her kid? Well, the weather's a little bad, she said; she was driving so he didn't have to walk in the mist. But why not send him to the door? He had fallen asleep in the car, she said, so she didn't want him to have to wake up.

I felt like saying, "Why don't you eat all his candy and get his stomach ache for him, too—then he can be completely protected!"

**If you could wave a wand**, if you could erase every failure, setback, suffering, and pain—are you sure it would be a good idea? Would it cause your child to grow up to be a better, stronger, more generous person? Is it possible that in some way people actually need adversity, setbacks, maybe even something like trauma to reach the fullest level of development and growth?

Even a casual reading of the Bible and understanding of how God works would answer **Yes**. God uses adversity to lead toward maturity. Setbacks are a tool in the hand of God to make us stronger, more effective and better prepared to be used of Him.

**This principle** is even seen in the Gospel. **The greatest** perceived setback of all happened to Jesus when He was killed on a cross. But it was a setup for the great miracle of resurrection.

**Some thoughts for application.**

- 1. When a setback happens, stay focused on the goodness of God**  
Don't let a setback cause you to think less of God. He has not changed.
- 2. When a setback happens, stay focused on the plan of God**  
Setbacks happen even when you are in the center of God's will.
- 3. When a setback happens, stay focused on the power of God**  
Be ready to watch what God will do next.