

Israel, My Firstborn Son

Exodus 4:18-31

About three years ago we were hiking in New Hampshire with some close friends of ours, along the Pemigewasset River, when all of a sudden we heard a lady shouting, “Help! Help!” We turned and looked at her, but she didn’t need the help. She was pointing at a little boy who had slipped into the river and was struggling to get out. Several people rushed over to the river’s edge, but one person jumped in to the river to save the boy and hoist him out—his mother.

Of all of the people racing to save the boy, what was it that caused this one person to be willing to move heaven and earth to rescue him? The simple fact that he was her son.

As we’ll see in our passage this morning, it’s that same motivation, that same passion that causes God to be willing to move heaven and earth to save Israel—because Israel is his son. And their identity is not only something God takes very seriously, but something he expects them to take seriously as well.

If you’re just joining us, we are partway into our journey through the book of Exodus. The second book of the Bible, in the Old Testament, which tells both Israel’s story of how they became a great nation, but ultimately God’s story of how he saves his people for his glory.

Our last couple of mornings in Exodus we looked at how God called Moses—a man who was born a Hebrew slave in Egypt, but raised as Egyptian royalty, only to be rejected by both Egypt and Israel, and who has for the last forty years lived as a sojourner in Midian—God calls Moses of all people to go back to Egypt and lead the people of Israel out of slavery to the land God promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God has heard the cries of his people, he is aware of their suffering, he is faithful to his covenant, and so he sends Moses. And despite his numerous objections as to why God should send someone else, God reveals to Moses that what qualifies him, and authorizes and empowers him for this role is not what he brings to the table, but the promise that Yahweh, the I AM will be *with* him. God will do the work.

And so the conversation between God and Moses at the burning bush ends in 4:17 without us really finding out what Moses was going to do. Will he stay or go? Will he trust God or turn and run? As we come to the rest of ch. 4 this morning, we find our answer: Moses steps out in obedience and begins his journey back to Egypt. And the story unfolds in four short vignettes. The first and the last sections (vv. 18-20 and 27-31) supply a sort of *confirmation* of his call—from his father-in-law Jethro in Midian, then from his brother Aaron and the elders of Israel in Egypt. The middle two sections are a little more difficult to understand, but seem to show us the *consequence* of God’s plan—what’s really at stake. What the exodus is all about.

So what I want to do this morning is look first at the confirmation on either end, and then spend most of our time thinking about the consequence of all of this—why God is willing to act so decisively to save his people.

CONFIRMATION (4:18-20, 27-31)

Look with me at ch. 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.’” Ever since Moses rescued his daughters at the well back in ch. 2, Moses has lived with this man’s family, tended his flock, married his daughter, raised his grandkids. And now after 40 years, he wants to go back to Egypt. That’s a little weird. And Moses is not exactly forthcoming with his reason. He has the decency and respect for his father-in-law to ask his permission and not just disappear, but he conceals what he’s really going to do. We don’t know why—if he doesn’t want his father-in-law to worry, or afraid he’ll say no, or not convinced that God will even show up. Moses is still taking on board the call he’s been given. And yet, despite his elusiveness, he goes. He is obeying God. And Jethro confirms this call without realizing it in that he gives his permission.

And to Jethro’s confirmation, God adds his own in reiterating his call in v. 19 and assuring him that those who previously sought his life are now dead. It’s easy to forget that the last time Moses was in Egypt he had a death sentence on him. That’s no longer a concern. He can present himself freely to Pharaoh and deliver God’s message without having to dodge his earlier accusers.

And so he takes off with his wife and two sons, and heads back to Egypt. And he takes not just his family, but “the staff of God”—what was once his ordinary shepherding staff, but is not a sign of God’s power. The staff that was transformed into a snake, the staff God told him in v. 17 to take with him, with which he will do the signs. When the narrator points out that Moses takes the staff, he’s signaling to us that Moses is going with the purposes of God in mind. He’s not just going to check if his family is still alive; he’s going to lead them out of Egypt.

And skipping ahead to v. 27, we see that while God was preparing Moses in Midian, he also prepares his brother Aaron in Egypt to go and meet him. Verse 27: “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.”

We don’t know how well Moses knew his biological family. He seems to have had some relationship with them, in that he wasn’t confused when God promised to send his brother Aaron to help him carry out his mission, and that Aaron seems really happy to see him here. From Moses’ vantage point, this is another incredible confirmation. God promised that Aaron would help him, and here Aaron is—meeting him at the mountain of God, presumably Sinai, where God had appeared to Moses earlier through the burning bush.

And there Moses tells him all that they must say, and shows him the signs he must do. And together they gather the elders of Israel, and “Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. 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” (4:30-31).

This is an incredible confirmation of God's presence, that God is at work. Not only for Moses, as the people listen to him and Aaron and believe them, just as God said they would. But also for Israel. They've been crying out and groaning in their bondage, and God really has heard them. He's actually seen their suffering and is now sending a deliverer to bring them out. He's validated that deliverer through miraculous signs. There is a renewed sense of hope in Israel. God has not forgotten. It's like the flyers that Allied Forces would drop over prison camps in World War II, announcing to the prisoners that the war was over and they would soon be free. Only multiply that by 100—it's not four years in a prison camp, but 400 years. And so the leaders of Israel respond in the only way appropriate—they bow their heads and worship God. They're being set free. They're finally going home.

But what will it take to get them out of Egypt and on their way home? And what's really at stake in God's mighty act of deliverance?

CONSEQUENCE (4:21-23, 24-26)

In between the two scenes of confirmation, we have two short vignettes that illustrate the consequence of God's actions—what's really at stake in the exodus. In vv. 21-23 God tells Moses what he is supposed to do and say before Pharaoh and *why*, and vv. 24-26 recount a rather obscure event along the way where God actually seeks to take Moses' life (or perhaps the life of his son—its's really strange). But together these two scenes show us the gravity and significance of God's deliverance of Israel. And it all has to do with their identity as God's firstborn son.

Israel, My Firstborn Son (vv. 21-23)

Look with me at v. 21 and God's instructions to Moses.

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.'" (4:21-23)

There's a lot going on in those short verses. But the first thing that strikes us as surprising is the reason God wants Moses to perform his signs before Pharaoh. It's *not* to convince him to let Israel go, but the opposite—it is in order to harden his heart.

Now we're going to see that phrase "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" or "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" several times in the chapters ahead, and we'll talk more about it when we get there. But it seems like a strange strategy here. Why have Moses go through all the theatrics of the signs and plagues—the blood and frogs and gnats and boils—if instead of convincing Pharaoh to release Israel, it actually dissuades him?

We'll discover several reasons in the chapters ahead, particularly God's desire to make his name and glory known to Pharaoh. But we see one reason right here: God is not trying to convince Pharaoh to change; he is preparing him for judgment. God will get his glory by saving Israel from slavery and judging Egypt for their sin.

Now, the idea of God’s judgment sometimes makes us pretty uncomfortable today. It can feel kind of harsh. Especially when you consider the form that God’s judgment will take: “If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” Why is God so passionate about delivering Israel and so deliberate in judging Egypt? The answer has to do with *who Israel is*—God’s firstborn son.

Before Moses is to say anything else to Pharaoh, he is to make the announcement: “Thus says the LORD, ‘Israel is my firstborn son.’” God’s plan to rescue Israel and judge Egypt revolves around the identity of this people—their relationship to God and the role they are called to play in God’s world as his firstborn son. “Let my *son* go that he may *serve* me.” Israel has a unique identity and vocation, a special relationship and role in the world. And it’s his love for his people that moves him to wrath on their oppressors—the two go hand-in-hand.

As one author describes, “To Pharaoh the Hebrews were lowly slaves, but to God they were beloved sons. Thus the problem with Pharaoh was not simply that he was a slaveholder (although that was bad enough), but that he was preventing God’s children from serving their Father.”¹ In fact the word used here for “serve” is the same word used to describe Pharaoh’s enslavement of Israel back in ch. 1 (1:13-14). By enslaving Israel, Pharaoh has not only placed himself between God and his child, but has stolen from God the service that rightfully belongs to him. This is a paternity battle—to whom does Israel rightly belong?

But there’s really no question. Israel is God’s firstborn son. Not in terms of chronology, but in terms of preeminence and priority. It was God who made them. It is God who revealed himself to them and chose them to be his special people. It is God who has protected and provided for them from the time of their ancestors to this day. They are his children; he is their Father. And it’s the nature of their relationship that fuels his passion to save them and fixes his resolve to bring their assailants to justice.

If you’ve ever lost your child at the park or the grocery store or the mall, you know the kind of panic that ensues because of the fear of what might happen. What father wouldn’t move heaven and earth to rescue their child and bring justice to their captors? When you think about what Pharaoh has done in these categories, in terms of God’s relationship to Israel as a Father to a son—how Pharaoh has kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, and oppressed God’s child—it’s pretty easy to see why he acts so passionately and forcefully. His wrath for Egypt flows out of his love for his son, Israel. God’s message for Pharaoh almost feels like that scene with Liam Neeson in the film, *Taken*: “I . . . have . . . a very particular set of skills. . . . Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you.”²

And yet God’s words to Pharaoh here are not the unrestrained passions of an enraged father bent on revenge. They are the judicious words of both a loving father and cosmic judge. God’s promise to punish Pharaoh is not about revenge; it’s about justice. True justice—eye for eye, son for son. You took my son, now I will take yours. And you will learn that I am the LORD, and you are not. That you may not play god with my children, or anyone else, and think you can get away with it.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005, 2015), 115.

² *Taken* (2008); see <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a31775/taken-speech/>.

Understanding Israel's identity as God's son, his children, helps us understand his passion for rescuing them, and his vigilance in judging their assailants. But it also helps us understand better what God is saving Israel for—not just for their own benefit, but because they have a role to play in the world as God's children. And we are reminded of what that role is and how significant it is in the next scene, and the not-so-funny thing that happened on the way to Egypt.

Keepers of the Covenant (vv. 24-26)

Verse 24:

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. (4:24-26)

These three verses are without a doubt the most confusing part of the entire book of Exodus. There's so much that's not clear, it's hard to know what to say, if anything. Why would God all of a sudden decide to put Moses to death after he went to so much effort to convince him to go? Why didn't they talk about this sooner? Who is he actually seeking to strike (the Hebrew is ambiguous)? How did Zipporah know what to do to address the problem? Is this when Moses sends his wife and kids back to Midian (cf. 18:2-3)? And what in the world is a "bridegroom of blood"? I don't have answers to any of those questions!

What we can say is that the crisis clearly has to do with the issue of circumcision, and the problem that Moses' son had not yet been circumcised. And that it was so big a problem that God was willing to kill Moses over it. What do we make of this? Two things, I think.

First, it shows us that God takes the sin of his own children just as serious as the sin of their enemies. When God made his covenant with Abraham back in Genesis 17, that he would be his God and Abraham and his offspring would be his people, and that Abraham himself would become the father of a multitude of nations, he gave him the sign of circumcision, that every male born would be circumcised on the eighth day, and no uncircumcised male would be allowed into the assembly of Israel (Gen. 17:1-14). Moses, by not circumcising his son, risks not merely forfeiting his mission, but forfeiting his life. If you thought that God was being soft on Israel and hard on Egypt, that's not how it works. Israel's guilt has to be dealt with too. In this case, it's the blood of circumcision that addresses it. Later, in the plague of the firstborn, it will be the blood of the lamb.

Second, this event reminds us that Israel's identity as God's son is not just about their relationship with God, but also about their role in the world. God saves his son that they might serve him. As the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they have been chosen by God to be his special people. And yet the reason God chose Israel was that he might bless all nations through them. The covenant of circumcision reminds us of the global scope of God's plan of blessing (cf. Gen. 17:4).

That means that not only must Pharaoh learn to take seriously their identity as God's son, and let them go; Israel must learn to take their own identity seriously too. They have work to do as servants of Go. What's about to happen is not just for them; God is not rescuing them from

Egypt so they kick back in luxury and self-indulgence. He's not bailing his trust fund baby out of prison so he can sip Mojitos at the golf course. He is saving them that they might serve him. That they might do their part to display his glory and advance his kingdom purposes on earth.

SONSHIP IN CHRIST

And this is where we see some of the important parallels between God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and his saving work in Christ.

God takes our identity as his children seriously. He *has* moved heaven and earth to save us. But he does not save us just so we can have it easy in life—so we can avoid the punishment of hell and milk all we can out of this world before we get to heaven. He saves us because we have work to do as his sons and daughters. He saves us to be servants of his kingdom—that we might no longer serve sin as our master, but instead be free to serve our true master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul describes it like this in Romans 8:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom. 8:12-17)

In Christ we have a new identity—children of God. What was true of ancient Israel becomes true of all who place their faith in Jesus, because Jesus came into this world as God's eternal Son to do for us and Israel what none of us could do for ourselves—to be the perfect, faithful son of God we were made to be. That's what he accomplished in his life of covenant faithfulness. That's what he accomplished on the cross by dying for our sin. That's what he makes possible through his resurrection from the dead. That's what he is accomplishing right now in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the true and better Son, the true and better Israel, whom God called out of Egypt in Matthew 2, as a fulfillment of Israel's identity and role as God's son (Matt. 2:15; cf. Hos. 11:1-2).

Through our union with Christ we have a new identity—we are children of God. And therefore we have a new vocation—we are servants of his kingdom. But it's not the kind of service driven by fear. Obeying God in order to try and earn his acceptance, or out of fear of what he'll do to us if we won't. Our service flows out of our identity as sons, out of our relationship with the Father. "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15).

It's our relationship with God as Father that motivates our love and service for God. And God is jealous that nothing get in the way of that. That we would not be kidnapped, or imprisoned, or enslaved by the things of this world and distracted from our true identity and mission in Christ.

Taking our identity as God's children seriously means we need to take the threat of sin seriously. We must deal judiciously with sin when we find ourselves tempted. As Jesus says in Matthew 18:8 (using a little hyperbole to make a huge point): "if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire." And we need to recognize that God will deal judiciously with sin when others tempt his children. Again, Jesus says in Matthew 18:6, "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

But what truly motivates a proper vigilance against sin is not fear (that's enslaving), but love. Loving God more than we love our sin. And being confident of God's unbreakable love for us. That "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

God will move heaven and earth to save his children. And he does so that we might serve him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. Did you ever get lost as a child, or have you ever lost your child in a public place? Describe what you felt, what you did, and what you would do if you learned that your child was in harm's way.

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What happened before our passage that helps us understand what's going on here?
3. How would you summarize the events in this passage?
4. What surprises do we encounter in these verses? In other words, what are some things that happen or are said that are unexpected or otherwise confusing?
5. Looking at 4:21-23, what do you think it means for Israel to be God's firstborn son? Are there other passages of Scripture that help us understand that?
6. How would you describe the significance of Israel's identity as God's firstborn son?
7. How should we understand the relationship between Israel as God's firstborn son and Jesus as God's firstborn son? (hint: see Hosea 11:1-2; Matt. 2:13-15)

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. How do you think Israel's identity as God's firstborn son relates to Christians today?
9. How does God's interaction with his firstborn in Exodus help us understand how he relates to his children today?
10. How should our identity as children of God through Jesus affect our lives?