

## Who Is the LORD?

Exodus 5:1-23

November is a big birthday month in our family, and on Friday I decided to try my hand at making my wife a triple-chocolate mousse cake for the occasion. I do not bake very often, and never without fear and trembling. Because it doesn't always work on the first try. The last time I tried to help bake something in a spring-form pan, it took two or three tries to get it right. And when a recipe fails on the first try, you have to decide what to do. Do I give up all together? Hang up my apron in shame? Do I go with a mix from a box? Even better, hit the Stop and Shop bakery? (There's no shame in that.) Or do I try to figure out what went wrong, and then try again? Did I accidentally use salt instead of sugar? Did I bake it too long, or not whisk it long enough? Did I miss an ingredient? Why didn't this thing work the first time?

Our passage in Exodus this morning tells of the first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, the first attempt for Moses to persuade Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to let the people of Israel go. To release them from slavery, that they might serve the LORD. And it doesn't go at all how they thought it would go. In fact, not only does it flop, it backfires in a big way. He pretty much burns down the kitchen, making the situation for Israel far worse than before he showed up.

And so why didn't this thing work the first time? Did Moses do something wrong? Say the wrong words, fail to follow the recipe?

What we're going to see as the story unfolds is *not* that Moses failed—he followed the recipe; he said what God told him to say. Nor was the recipe flawed; the meeting accomplished exactly what God intended it to do. *But there is a missing ingredient.* Something lacking in Pharaoh, and in Israel, and in Moses. And revealing that missing ingredient was the real goal of this first encounter. God sent Moses into Pharaoh's kitchen not so he could execute a perfect meal, but so that all of them—Moses, Pharaoh, and Israel—would learn what the real problem in the story is, the problem that God will spend the rest of the book addressing: none of them truly *know* the LORD.

There is no ingredient more essential to life than knowing the LORD. And this missing ingredient is revealed in three movements in the story. The bulk of it shows us Pharaoh's ignorance of the LORD, specifically of his authority. "Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice? . . . I do not know the LORD" (5:2). That's the explicit reason he refuses to comply with Moses' request and instead turns up the heat on Israel. We read that in vv. 1-18. But then, second, we see Israel's ignorance of the LORD in vv. 19-21, specifically with respect to his worthiness. "Who is the LORD that we should suffer for him?" Moses has made them a stink in the sight of Pharaoh, and they're pretty much done with this escape plan. Finally in vv. 22-23, we see Moses' ignorance of the LORD, specifically with respect to his faithfulness. "Who is the

LORD that I should keep serving him? You sent me here in your name, and it's not working. You haven't delivered your people at all."

So we'll start with Pharaoh's ignorance in vv. 1-18 . . .

### **Who is the LORD that I should obey him? The Authority of God (5:1-18)**

A little context for those of you who are just joining us in our series. Exodus tells the story of how God shows his glory by saving his people. The people of Israel have been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt for four generations, oppressed, tortured, afflicted, and God has raised up Moses to lead them out of Egypt and into the land he promised their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In chapters 3-4 we saw how God called and equipped Moses for this task, revealing his name to him—who he is, the LORD, Yahweh, the I AM who promises to be with Moses. And then he reunites him with his brother Aaron who is going to help him speak to Pharaoh, declaring to him that Israel is not just cheap labor, or some random people group—they are God's firstborn son, his children. And will move heaven and earth to save them, that they might serve him (and not Pharaoh).

And so Moses and Aaron reconnected, and together they went to the elders (the leaders) of Israel and reported what God had said and showed them the signs God gave them to do. And as chapter four ended, the people of Israel, convinced that God had seen them and heard them in their affliction and was now going to save them, bowed down and worshiped (4:31).

With that boost of confidence, Moses and Aaron now have their first audience with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And here is their request, v. 1: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" Now, notice he doesn't say, 'Let us go that we might hightail it out of here and never see your abusive face again.' Instead he requests permission to go into the wilderness and hold a feast to God, an act of worship. Which seems evasive, perhaps even deceptive at first. Is Moses chickening out here? Too afraid to be direct? Cutting corners in the recipe?

But this is actually what God told him to say. "Thus says *the LORD* . . . 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" And when Moses reiterates the request in v. 3, "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," he's virtually quoting what God told him back in ch. 3:18.

So why would God tell Moses to say this, rather than revealing the whole plan? Two things to keep in mind here. First, Pharaoh has kidnapped God's children; God does not owe him an explanation of what he's going to do. Second, focusing the request on worship actually gets at the heart of the matter—by enslaving Israel, Pharaoh is not only exploiting God's child, he is impersonating God. Putting himself in his place, stealing from him the worship that he alone deserves.

And that also explains Pharaoh's offense at Moses' request. Remember that in ancient Egypt, Pharaoh was a deity. The idea that the people of Israel would hold a feast to some other god was offensive. What other god has authority to tell me what to do? And that's the heart of the problem, the missing ingredient in why Pharaoh is so offended by Israel's request and reacts in the harsh way that he does—*he doesn't know the LORD*. Look at his confession in v. 2: "But

Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.’”

You come into my house, talking about this God of the Hebrews, this Yahweh, like I’m supposed to know who he is or do what he says. You’ve got to be out of your mind! It’s like someone walking into your boss’s office at work and telling him that there’s a guy named Bob who says everyone in the company gets the next week off. What’s your boss going to say? “Who in the world is Bob? He doesn’t run the show here. I’m not giving anybody the week off.” “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”

And there it is, from his very own lips, the central problem of the story: Pharaoh doesn’t know the LORD. He doesn’t understand his authority, that he actually has a right to command the worship of his people. And that he actually has a right to tell Pharaoh what to do. He doesn’t know the LORD. But he’s about to find out in a big way just who he is.

But what happens when we don’t know who the LORD is? One of the results we see here is a power grab. Pharaoh’s ignorance of Yahweh shows itself in four public policy moves, each of which is designed to exalt himself above God while putting Israel in their place. First, he denies their request. He prohibits them from serving their God. There’s no such thing as religious liberty in ancient Egypt. Pharaoh says in v. 2, “I will not let Israel go.” And again in v. 4: “But the king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.’” There’s only one god in Egypt who worthy of serving, and this little conversation is an interruption in your service.

Second, he distorts their motives. He projects on them a fraudulent motivation, accusing them of not really wanting to worship God, but simply trying to get out of work. He says in v. 8 that they are *idle*—lazy. That’s what this is really about. “. . . for they are idle. Therefore they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God’” (v. 8). And again in v. 17, “You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’” He doesn’t believe that they really have any interest in worshipping Yahweh, or that they would need to travel into the wilderness to hold a feast for him. This talk of serving Yahweh is a thinly veiled ploy to get an extended weekend.

And so third, he disciplines them for their insubordination. He punishes them for wanting to worship Yahweh. Verse 6:

The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, <sup>7</sup> "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. <sup>8</sup> But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' <sup>9</sup> Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words." (5:6-9)

And this creates all sorts of problems for Israel. They’re scattering throughout the land trying to collect stubble for straw, they’re being beaten for not meeting their production quotas. It’s a mess.

In summary, as a result of his ignorance of the LORD, Pharaoh declares himself a substitute deity. He puts himself in the place of God. Because he does not know who the LORD is, he does

not acknowledge his authority, his worthiness, even his existence. As a result, he runs his country and treats his slaves as though he is god.

Ignorance of the LORD often results in a power grab. When we don't know the LORD, or who he is, we will replace him with something else—often ourselves. And when we replace him with something else, we must demonize the alternatives in order to protect our new god's worship. Deny their practice, distort their motives, and discipline insubordination. You will be made to submit.

It's not hard to recognize a few parallels with the slow erosion of religious liberty in our culture today. Now I don't want to overstate the case—we are blessed to live in a land where our constitution grants us the right to freely exercise our religion. That is not the case in many places in the world today. We're not afraid for our life when we show up here on Sunday mornings, or when someone finds out we're a Christian.

And yet we are experiencing a slow erosion of those religious liberties as the new religions of secularism and sexual liberty claim authority and demand that everyone else fall in line or be made to submit. People of faith—of many different faiths, not just Christianity—are now told by our government what their faith actually requires or doesn't require, where they can operate according to that faith, or where they must compromise it or leave it at the door. You are free to be pro-life personally, but you are required by law to fund the abortions of your employees through your company healthcare plan, or else face crushing fines by the government. You're free to believe what you want about human sexuality, but you're not free to apply that belief to your business if it involves catering or serving weddings, or even in a church when it comes to which bathroom someone uses.

The idea that God in heaven would have an actual authority over us, and that we would actually care about what he says and want to serve and obey him—there is less and less space for that in public policy. Policy that is increasingly comfortable with denying religious practices (creating a religious test for immigration), distorting the motives of religious people ('religious liberty is just a "code word" for discrimination and bigotry'<sup>1</sup>), and disciplining any insubordination—punishing those who don't get in line.

When we don't know the LORD, or who he is, we will replace him with something else, whether at the level of public policy levels or personal aspiration. My family, my finances, my career ambitions, even ministry ambitions. And we will demonize any who threaten our substitute god.

This is what Pharaoh's ignorance of Yahweh produces. But the way Israel responds to Pharaoh's policies reveals an equally troubling lack of knowledge in their lives—they too are missing the key ingredient. They don't know the LORD either, particularly with respect to his worthiness.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Castro's comments in the recent U.S. Civil Rights Commission report. See Joe Carter, "U.S. Civil Rights Commission: 'Religious Freedom' Is Code Word for Racism, Homophobia, and 'Christian Supremacy'" *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, Sept. 13, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/u.s.-civil-rights-commission-religious-freedom-is-code-word-for-racism-homophobia-and-christian-supremacy>.

### **Who is the LORD that we should suffer for him? The Worthiness of God (5:19-21)**

Look with me at v. 19:

The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, "You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day."<sup>20</sup> They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh;<sup>21</sup> and they said to them, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (5:19-21)

How is it that the people who bowed down and worshiped God at the end of ch. 4 for the fact that he was going to deliver them, are now calling on God to judge between them and the people he sent? The answer is that they too lack a knowledge of the LORD. They don't understand who he is or what he is doing, and especially how he plans to do it. When they realize what their release from slavery will cost them, that this is not a surgical extraction but there's a chance of taking shrapnel in the crossfire, they're not sure their deliverance is worth it. Which means they're not sure if the LORD is worth it.

If ignorance of the LORD can produce a power grab for some, for others it results in fear and self-protection. I'm not sure I want this cake anymore. I thought following God was going to make my life go better; now I'm suffering? I thought if I trusted Jesus God would answer all of my prayers and keep me from harm, so why was my department outsourced? Why is my child sick? Why can't we make ends meet? If this is the cake that comes with trusting God, I'm not sure I want it. Living on the scraps of slavery in Egypt isn't so bad after all.

That's Israel's reaction. But if they could see what God was going to accomplish through this, if they could taste but a *crumb* of his goodness, of his true worthiness, his majesty and mercy and the unparalleled satisfaction that comes from knowing him, they would know what the apostle Paul came to realize in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." And again in Philippians 3: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . ." (Phi. 3:8-9).

And this is one of the reasons the exodus is not a surgical extraction. Because Pharaoh is not the only one ignorant of God's true authority and worthiness; his people don't realize it yet either. But God will make himself known to them and to Pharaoh through what's about to happen, and not only to them, but to all generations.

But there is one more person we see in this story who also lacks that key ingredient. Who does not know the LORD, specifically with respect to his faithfulness. Moses, God's servant, in vv. 22-23.

### **Who is the LORD that I should keep serving him? The Faithfulness of God (5:22-23)**

Verse 22: "Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.'" (5:22-23).

This is a pretty bold complaint—really, an attempt to rebuke God for not keeping up his end of the deal. He is not measured in his words. He accuses God of doing evil to his people. He blames Pharaoh’s rejection of his plan, and Israel’s growing rejection of his leadership due to their increased labor on *God’s failure* to show up. It feels a lot like the end of ch. 2 again—Moses being rejected by both Israel and Egypt. But the problem this time is not Moses’ unchecked zeal, but the LORD’s failure to keep his word. Your recipe stinks. “Since I came to Pharaoh to speak *in your name*, he has done evil to this people, and *you* have not delivered your people at all.”

And it’s easy to understand Moses’ frustration. I left everything I had to answer your call, and travelled all the way back here, putting my life at risk, only to be made a fool?

But again, God’s goal in this first encounter was not to convince Pharaoh to let Israel go, but to expose the central problem with Pharaoh, and Israel, and Moses—they do not know the LORD. For Pharaoh that resulted in a power grab; for Israel, it created fear and self-protection. For Moses, it results in disillusionment with God. Why keep serving him?

But now that the fundamental problem is on the table, the missing ingredient has been revealed, God will spend the rest of this book making himself known to Pharaoh, to Israel, and to Moses, and to all generations who read this book. He will return to the question of his name in ch. 6, since Moses seems to think it is broken. And as God works his signs and wonders and accomplishes his judgment and salvation in the chapters ahead, there is a particular phrase that we see repeated over and over and over again—“that you may know that I am the LORD.”

Who is the LORD that I should obey him? Let me show you. Let me tell you.

- 7:5: “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”
- 8:10: “. . . Moses said, ‘Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God.’”
- 8:22: “But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.”

Who is the LORD that we should suffer for him? That we should keep serving him?

- 6:7: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”
- 10:1-2: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.’”

Nineteen times in the pages ahead we will see some variation on this phrase, “that you may know that I am the LORD.” God himself will supply the key ingredient; he will make himself known in a way that no one should ever forget.

And what he is going to do in Israel and Egypt's lives as this book unfolds, he will do in a climactic way through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God makes himself known in a full and final way. Hebrews 1:1-4 puts it like this:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Jesus is the final and full revelation of God. To know the Father is to know him through the Son. And there is no ingredient more essential to life than knowing the LORD.

Exodus is going to open our eyes and hearts more and more to this as we move on, but the question I want us to ask this morning is this: Do I know the LORD? Am I missing that key ingredient? Do I live in a way that knowledge of him makes a difference? Do I know the LORD? And I'm not talking about facts or information, but experientially, relationally.

And here are some questions right from our passage, to help us answer that. Is my life characterized more by grabbing for power or bending others to my will, than by bowing before the authority of Jesus? Do I spend my days in self-protective fear and worry, grasping for life rather than being willing to lose everything that I might gain Jesus? Am I disillusioned with God because he's not accomplishing his work on my terms or my timetable, rather than trusting him to be at work even when I can't see it?

Do I know the LORD who has all authority, is uniquely worthy, and absolutely faithful, and who has proven it in the cross of Jesus Christ? There is no ingredient more essential to life than knowing the LORD. I pray that you would have that knowledge through faith in Jesus, and that God would grow all of us in that knowledge as he makes himself known to us through the book of Exodus in the weeks and months ahead.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Opening Question**

1. What do you think it means to "know the Lord"? It's a common biblical phrase, but what do you think it really means?

### **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 reason does Pharaoh give for not letting Israel go? How do you think this reason relates to the rest of the story?

5. What does Pharaoh do to Israel as a result of Moses' request? How do the Israelites respond?
6. How does Moses respond to all of this in his conversation with God?
7. How would you summarize the main point the author is trying to communicate?

### **Questions for Reflection and Application**

8. How can we tell if we truly know the LORD? What are some signs, based on this passage, that our knowledge of him may be thin or weak?
9. How does Jesus Christ make the Lord known to us? Why is it necessary to know the Lord through him?
10. What ways has God given us to grow in our knowledge of the LORD? How can you put some of those ways into practice in the weeks ahead?