

The Prophet and the King

Exodus 6:10–7:13

This morning we return to the book of Exodus, a series we began last fall and stepped out of during Advent. But we are back into this beautiful story of God's love, power, and faithfulness played out in the lives of ancient Israel's history, but not merely as a record of what God once did. Exodus is the pattern of God's saving work in all times for all peoples, a pattern that is ultimately taken up and fulfilled by Christ.

And yet where we left off, Israel is still in bondage. They came to Egypt as a family of refugees, seeking relief from a devastating famine. Through rather horrible circumstances, God prepared the way for Israel to find a temporary home in Egypt, sending Joseph ahead of his family. And there they thrived for several generations and grew from a small family into a great nation. Which is when a new Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph saw their growing strength, not as God fulfilling his promises to bless Abraham and his descendants, but as a threat to his own kingdom and glory.

And so the Exodus story begins with oppression and evil. The King of Egypt turns the Hebrew refugees into slaves, treating them harshly and exploiting them for his many building projects. And when that doesn't slow their growth, he begins a government-sponsored, systematic program of murder, targeting the Hebrew babies boys. He commands the Hebrew midwives to murder any baby boy they see born, and when they refuse, he commands all Egyptians to take any Hebrew baby boy they see and cast him into the Nile.

But in ch. 2 we read about the boy who lived, the one who got away. Whose life was not only preserved, but who was rescued by Pharaoh's own daughter, and raised in Pharaoh's own home. The boy who would grow up to challenge Pharaoh on God's behalf, demanding that he let God's people go.

But so far, not so good. To begin with, Moses has always been an unlikely candidate for leading a revolution. He spent the first forty years of his life in the lap of privilege, and the next forty in relative obscurity, as a fugitive in Midian, cut off from his people. He tries to decline God's job offer at the burning bush, but it wasn't an offer—it was a call. God equips Moses with his own name and power, and even accommodates his insecurity by teaming him up with his brother Aaron, who will speak to others on his behalf. But despite an initial warm welcome by the Israelites in ch. 4, everything has pretty much gone downhill from there.

In ch. 5, Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh for the first time on God's behalf, telling Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out into the wilderness to worship their God. That backfired in a big way. Not only did Pharaoh refuse, he increased the severity of Israel's slavery so much that

now Israel is mad at Moses, too. When we last looked at Exodus, we saw Moses' complaint to God, essentially that he was failing to live up to his name. The name he had revealed to Moses at the burning bush. The name that signified God's intention to come down and be with his people in order to rescue them and bring them out of Egypt and into the land he promised Abraham. It's not working.

God reaffirmed his name and his plan in ch. 6:1-8, that Israel *will* come to know God by name in their experience of salvation. But when we come to ch. 6:9, we see that Israel's still not buying it: "Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery."

Israel is beyond hope. They're so broken, they're so hurt, they have been let down by what feels like both Moses and God, that to hope again for things to change is simply too risky; the pain of being let down again will be too much. Is God really saving them? Is Moses really the guy?

But Israel's not the only one asking those questions. We are too, as readers, and so is Moses, which is what we see when we come to our passage this morning, Exodus 6:10–7:13 (we only read part of that earlier, but we'll look at the whole section together). And yet, while it has taken Moses a long time to come to grips with his call, in this section we finally see a significant transition. What begins as hesitancy and insecurity, based on his past failures and the intimidating circumstances before him, ends in confident obedience to speak God's Word regardless of the results—a pattern that continues throughout the rest of the book.

So what happens between Moses' hesitancy and insecurity in 6:10-13, and his confident obedience before Pharaoh in 7:8-13, that convinces both us and Moses of his call? Two things: the clarification of Moses' heritage in 6:14-27 (which helps the questioning reader take confidence in God), and the clarification of God's plan in 7:1-7 (which helps the questioning prophet, Moses, take that same confidence).

But it begins with the hesitancy of God's prophet in 6:10-30.

The Hesitancy of God's Prophet (6:10-30)

Verse 10: "So the LORD said to Moses, 'Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land.' But Moses said to the LORD, 'Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?' But the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge about the people of Israel and about Pharaoh king of Egypt: to bring the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt." (6:10-13).

They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. That's pretty much what Moses has done, and what God is asking him to keep doing. He spoke to Pharaoh in ch. 5, and it didn't work. Now God tells him to do the same thing again, and again, and again. Eleven more times in the next few chapters. With failure behind him, and an intimidating foe before him, Moses' hesitancy and insecurity are pretty honest. His own people won't listen to him anymore, why should Pharaoh?

He describes his problem as being of "uncircumcised lips," which is a rather colorful way of describing either his poor speaking ability, which he talked about back in ch. 4 (4:10), or more

generally, his unfitnes for serving the covenant God (cf. Isa. 6:5). Either way, Moses protests to God: you've got the wrong guy. I can't get the results you're looking for. And as readers following the story so far, we're kind of wondering the same thing.

But once again, two things happen in this story to put those lingering questions to rest, first for us and then for Moses. The first is the clarification of Moses' heritage through the genealogy of 6:14-27.

The Prophet's Heritage (6:14-27)

It's not uncommon for Old Testament narratives to include genealogies at different points in their story. Genesis does it regularly; Ruth ends with one; 1 Chronicles starts with one; so does Matthew in the New Testament. And when they do, they are never there just for curiosity's sake, or for the sake of historical record. They always contribute to the story in some way. Maybe as a fast-forward button, like in Genesis 5 or 10. Or a mid-credit teaser of what's coming next, like in Ruth. Or, in the case of Exodus 6, as a kind of flashback to reveal up-to-this-point unknown information about a major character. Information that interrupts the story to help us understand why Moses' complaint about being "of uncircumcised lips" is no deal breaker with God. Notice how the last few verses of ch. 6 basically repeat Moses' complaint and God's call in 6:11-12 (cf. 6:28-30)—they pick up right where we left off. Which means the genealogy is intended to address this question, of Moses' qualification—but more for the reader than for Moses. There's no evidence that Moses received this report at this moment. But there's something the author wants *us* to know about Moses' heritage, that should convince us that he is in fact God's man. He'll address Moses' insecurities in ch. 7.

So what do we find here? The genealogy itself begins pretty normal, as a record of each tribe of Israel. It starts through the same list we saw at the beginning of the book (1:1-4): Reuben, Simeon, Levi . . . But then something odd happens; it gets stuck on Levi, and goes into a lot more detail on his descendants, until it arrives at the intended destination: Moses and Aaron (6:20). We know this by the amount of detail we read about them, especially Aaron's family (6:23, 25). And because of the conclusion in vv. 26-27: "These are the Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said: 'Bring out the people of Israel from the land of Egypt by their hosts.' It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing out the people of Israel from Egypt, this Moses and this Aaron."

In case we have been doubting Moses' qualification or questioning God's wisdom in using him and Aaron, this genealogy is intended to put those questions to rest. First, it confirms for us Moses' and Aaron's Levitical heritage. Up to this point, their identities had been rather obscured (cf. 2:1-22); now we see their official pedigree. Which is especially important for the role Aaron will play as the father of the Levitical priesthood.

But it also shows us that what has seemed obscure to us, even to Moses, has not been hidden from God. This genealogy reveals the providence of God, how he has been at work to raise up Moses and Aaron *intentionally*—the story has been moving *toward them*. And not only them, but there are several other key characters introduced here, who will play a bigger role later in Leviticus and Numbers: Aaron's sons, Korah, Aaron's nephew Phineas (6:23-25).

And so whatever doubts we as readers might have had about Moses so far, God intends to put them to rest by showing us, through this genealogy, that these are the guys he has been at work

to raise up for this very moment. Not unlike how God uses the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel to show the reader that entire course of history hasn't been aimless, but moving in a specific direction, leading up to the birth of Christ.

But what about Moses? What is it that shakes him out of his hesitancy and insecurity, so that he is able to speak prophetically to the king, in confident obedience to God?

The Role of God's Prophet (7:1-7)

In ch. 7:1-7, God clarifies his plan for Moses—what role the prophet will play. He starts by clarifying Moses and Aaron's identity, vv. 1-2: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land.'"

This is similar to the point God has been making all along—that Moses is not going to Pharaoh of his own authority. He's not a revolutionary or a rebel; he is *a representative of God*. It's like a modern-day ambassador. When the President of the United States sends an ambassador to speak to the leaders of a foreign nation, it carries the very authority of the President; it's as if the President himself were there. So Moses will be *as God* to Pharaoh.

And yet, since Moses is unsure about his speaking ability, and God has accommodated him by giving him Aaron to speak for him (cf. 4:10-17), it's as if the President sends the ambassador with a translator or spokesperson. The message still carries the same weight; the ambassador still has the same role and authority; he just has help. So it is that since Moses is like God to Pharaoh, that makes Aaron like his prophet. The point being in all of this, is that their role is to *say to Pharaoh whatever God tells them to say*; and what they say carries the authority of God.

But just as important as clarifying their role, is clarifying Moses and Aaron's expectations of what God is actually sending them to do—the real nature of their prophetic ministry. It is not, as both they and Israel assumed, simply to persuade Pharaoh to let them go by the end of each conversation (such that his refusal constitutes their failure). If that were the case, then this plan would indeed be insane—doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

But God is doing something much, much bigger. As he explains in vv. 3-5:

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. 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."

It's not Moses' job to get results. It's Moses' job to speak God's word *regardless of the results*. In fact, God's plan is that Pharaoh *won't* listen. God is going to harden his heart. Next week, Travis is going to walk us through the plague narratives, the signs and wonders God will send Moses and Aaron to do before Pharaoh, again and again. And again and again, we will see Pharaoh harden his heart, or God harden Pharaoh's heart (it's described both ways). God's plan

is that Pharaoh *won't* listen. Why? Because God is not trying to persuade Pharaoh; he is preparing him for judgment.

Which sounds harsh. Why doesn't God give him a chance? But the trial is already over. The verdict has already been issued. The sentence is now being carried out, and that sentence is judgment. A judgment that is at the same time the just punishment for Pharaoh's willful crimes, *and* the sovereign plan of God to save his people and display his glory.

It is through their experience of judgment that Egypt will come to know the name of the LORD. Do you remember what Pharaoh said to Moses the first time he ask him to let Israel go, back in ch. 5? "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" (5:2). God is going to answer his ignorance in a way he will never forget. 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." Egypt will come to know Yahweh through great acts of judgment.

But it's through these exact same actions that Israel will *also* come to know Yahweh by name—not in his judgment, but by experiencing his salvation (cf. 10:1-2). The mighty hand that judges Egypt is at the same time saving Israel.

So God's plan is not that Pharaoh be persuaded by Moses. His plan is to prepare Pharaoh of judgment, that he might save Israel and display his glory. And so Moses need no longer be afraid of failing, if failure means that Pharaoh refuses to listen. That's guaranteed; that's part of the plan. Moses' job is not to convince Pharaoh; it is to speak God's Word to Pharaoh (through Aaron) *regardless of the results*.

The Obedience of God's Prophet (7:8-13)

With that clarified call, we see a renewed confidence. An emboldened and obedient Moses and Aaron who do "just as the LORD commanded" (cf. 7:6, 10, 20).

Chapter 7:8-13 shows us the next encounter with Pharaoh, which sets up the ten plagues that follow. Verse 8:

Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. (7:8-10)

So far so good. But then Pharaoh deploys his counter-measures. Verse 11:

Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (7:11-13)

That doesn't look good. That kind of undercuts God's uniqueness and power—Pharaoh's magicians can duplicate God? This looks like another failure. But there are subtle clues that it

will eventually turn out for success. The magicians may be able to conjure a few tricks with their dark arts, but they can only make the situation worse—more snakes, more frogs, more blood (cf. 7:22; 8:7). Moreover, when Moses' staff swallows the magicians' serpents, it's both a declaration of Yahweh's supremacy, and a foreshadowing of Egypt's ultimate demise, being *swallowed* by the Red Sea (the only other time the verb here for "swallow" is used in Exodus).¹

This looks and feels like another failure. But it's really a success. Not only in the subtle hints at God's supremacy, but most importantly in the simple fact that *Moses and Aaron obeyed*. They put away past failures, set aside intimidating circumstances; they trusted God and spoke his word to Pharaoh, regardless of the results. Results that don't look positive to us (Pharaoh hardens his heart), but are exactly what God ordained.

And it's only with this kind of trust in God that they're going to be able to go before Pharaoh again and again, with no progress in convincing him to release Israel, but full confidence that the results are in God's hand. When God calls a servant, he equips him with his word and sends him to speak, even if no one listens.

The Church as a Prophetic Minority

Such is often the call of ministry. The job of the prophet is not to make God's word effective or easier to swallow. To persuade people by any means. The job of God's prophet—whether we're talking ancient Israel or modern preacher—is to declare God's Word clearly and faithfully, entrusting the results to God.

Moses played a unique role in Israel's history and God's plan of redemption. But we've been sent into the world with a unique message. A message of both judgment and salvation from God—that sin really is sinful, and grace really is sufficient through faith in Christ. Christ came as the perfect prophet, priest, and king. He died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God (1 Pet. 3:18). And it's in the cross, we see both the judgment of God and the salvation of God come together to display the glory of God. Just as God judged Egypt's sin, and through that judgment saved Israel, so in the cross God judges our sin, dealing decisively with it, and through that judgment brings us salvation, freeing from sin and death all who believe, thus displaying his beauty and glory.

That is the truth. That is our hope. That is our message—a message we are called to proclaim, regardless of the results. People won't always listen. They will not always respond the way we hope. After all, as it's often said, the same sun that melts the butter also hardens the clay. The same message that produced judgment in Egypt brought salvation to Israel. So the message that Christ died for sins is good news to those being saved, and bad news to those who reject Jesus and continue in sin—they remain under judgment. Speaking of his own gospel ministry, Paul describes it like this in 2 Corinthians 2:15-17:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God *we speak* in Christ.

¹ See Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 113.

Confident, obedient, clear, faithful declaration of God’s Word—with the results in God’s hands.

That’s hard! That’s not easy to do. Just as Moses was tempted to be hesitant or insecure in speaking God’s Word, whether because of past failures or intimidating circumstances, we can be tempted to do the same today, whether from the pulpit or in our personal or public witness. Sometimes we’re tempted to keep our mouths shut. Maybe we’ve had a bad experience in the past where we put ourselves out there and shared Christ, and it was thrown back in our face. Or it created a strain in a relationship. *It didn’t produce the results we wanted or expected.* Maybe we’re simply afraid of that happening. And so we keep quiet.

Maybe we’re tempted, based on past experiences, or based on how we anticipate future conversations will go, to *change* the message a little bit. Make it easier to swallow. Get rid of the parts we think people choke on or find offensive, and only emphasize the parts they’ll like. Or even exchange those parts for something we think people will like better. Tell them what they want to hear. Better chance of getting results.

But if God has called his servants, equipped them with his word, and sent them into the world to speak, we cannot stay quiet. Nor can we change the message based on what we think will be more effective or acceptable. If you’re a news anchor, and you receive a report from the National Weather Service that an F-5 tornado is bearing down on a local town—260-320 mph winds—you can’t stay silent because you don’t think people will believe you (tornadoes don’t hit Massachusetts). Or change the message because you think people want to hear something else (we’ll get better ratings if we tell people it’s going to sunny outside). You can’t withhold or alter the message because you’re afraid it won’t produce the results you want. The results aren’t up to you. Your job is to tell the news, not because it’s popular, but because *it’s true*. So it is for the church today, whether from the pulpit or in our personal or public witness. When God calls a servant, he equips him with his word and sends him to speak it, even if no one listens.

We must speak it from the *pulpit*. Preach it clearly and faithfully, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:2: “But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” And we must preach it regularly, even if no one is listening. As Paul says in his second letter to Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season . . .” (2 Tim. 4:1-2). Preach the word when people are listening—when it’s in season, landing in good soil. And keep preaching even if they’re not—when it’s out of season, falling on rocky soil. God doesn’t call the preacher to be a soil tester, but to sow the seed and trust God with the results.² We must speak it from the pulpit.

We must speak it *personally*, in our homes and schools and workplaces. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses commands Israel to saturate their entire lives with the Word of God. “These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. . . . You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:6-7, 9). Whether coming or going, sitting or standing, we are always

² This illustration belongs to Jared Wilson.

representatives of Christ, entrusted with his Word, which is our life (cf. Deut. 32:47). We must speak it personally.

And we must speak it in the *public square*—to governors and kings and presidents. Kings and rulers were one of the most frequent audiences of the Old Testament prophets. King Pharaoh, the kings of Israel and Judah, King Herod in the New Testament. The prophets were often known for their criticism of unfaithful kings. That’s one of the reasons Herod freaks out when people speculate that Jesus is Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets—all people who spoke truth to corrupted power (cf. Mk. 6:14-15). And therefore kings were some of the greatest persecutors of God’s prophets. They didn’t always like their message. And so some prophets held back. Others told the kings what they wanted. But if the prophet doesn’t speak God’s Word to power, who will?

This is one of the roles God has given to the church today in this fallen world. God has equipped his church with a unique message—one that is able to be honest about the sinfulness of sin and the sufficiency of grace, at the same time. No other message can do that. And so we need to bring it to bear not only on personal lives, but also the challenges of the world today.

Today is Sanctity of Life Sunday. Are we speaking truth to power in the abortion industry that preys on the most vulnerable of our society? Are we speaking redemption and wholeness through Christ to those taken in by their lies?

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Racial tensions in our nation are the worst they’ve been in years. Are we speaking peace to one another, regardless of skin color? Are we speaking truth to power when government policies, agendas, and systems work against the dignity of all people? After all, we have a message that can do what no other message can—take people from every tribe, language, nation, and skin color, and unite them in one eternal family forever in Christ.

God has placed his church in the world to be what has recently been described as *a prophetic minority*, speaking God’s Word from the margins.³ Not as rabble rousers or revolutionaries. We pray for our leaders and those in authority; we submit to the governing powers God has placed over us (1 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-18). But we do not tell them what they want to hear just so that we can stay close to those in power. This has been the prophet’s folly for millennia, and we’re fooling ourselves if we think we’re not susceptible to it today. As a prophetic voice in a fallen world, the church will inevitably and necessarily get political at times. It must never become partisan. Our allegiance is not to a political party, but King Jesus, who calls his servants, equips them with his Word, and sends them into the world to speak, even if no one listens.

The results of gospel ministry are not in our hands. What is given to us is to speak. To declare the judgment and salvation of God, which come together in Christ, for our good and his glory. May we do so faithfully, to the glory of God.

³ See Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What happened before our passage that helps us understand what's going on here?
2. Moses expresses hesitancy and insecurity in 6:9-13? What is he hesitant to do and where does that insecurity come from?
3. What do you notice about the genealogy in ch. 6 (i.e. what it talks about, how it's placed). Why do you think the author interrupts the story to put it here?
4. How does God clarify both Moses and Aaron's identity and his actual plan in 7:1-7? What surprises you about this?
5. How do we see God's plan unfolding through each character in the events of 7:8-13? How does this set up what follows with the 10 plagues?
6. What do we learn about the mission of God's prophet based on this passage?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. In what way does the church have a prophetic role in the world today?
8. What similarities do you see between Moses' insecurity or hesitancy and any insecurity in your own ministry or service today?
9. How does what we learn about God's plan for his prophet in this passage give us confidence or courage for the mission he has given us today?