



CRISIS OF FAITH

Exodus 5:1-6:13, Matthew 11:28-30

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There's a common thread running through Exodus 5-6: everyone in the story is experiencing a crisis of faith. A crisis of faith is a crossroads moment, at the intersection of beliefs and circumstances, usually resulting from unmet expectations. It's different from those occasional doubts or uncertainties everyone has about their beliefs. The crisis of faith is a moment of decision: something has to give. Either revise one's expectations and continue believing, or abandon one's faith because it failed to deliver.

For example, I have a friend who was a Christian, but who also wanted to live the American dream. When she turned 30, she had a crisis of faith, because she had always believed that by that age, she would have achieved the American dream. When it didn't turn out that way, she left the church. In other words, she kept her expectations but lost her faith.

I have another Christian friend whose wife left him. This sparked for him a crisis of faith, because he couldn't imagine why God would allow something like this to happen. Yet he drew near to the Lord at the crossroads, and through it his faith grew stronger. In other words, he kept his faith in spite of unmet expectations.

You get the idea: the crisis of faith is a moment of decision at the crossroads, where life and beliefs intersect. I used to think of a crisis of faith as something that would happen apart from God, in the dark night of the soul when God feels far away. But in reality, the opposite is true. It's when we begin to draw near to God, when we discover more of who he is, that our unmet expectations and his true identity come into conflict with one another.

If you haven't yet had a crisis of faith, sooner or later you probably will. What will you do when it comes? Will you cling to your expectations and abandon your faith, or will you adjust your expectations and keep your faith?

Exodus 5-6 is about a crisis of faith, precipitated by God's drawing near into the lives of all the people in the story—Pharaoh, the Israelites, and Moses. How will they respond? Will they cling to their expectations? Or to their faith? As we read through this passage, we'll learn better how to trust God in spite of unmet expectations.

PHARAOH'S CRISIS OF FAITH. EXODUS 5:1-9.

God sends Moses to confront the new Pharaoh, seeking the release of the captive Hebrew nation. Moses is God's ambassador, so he speaks on behalf of God, saying:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.' Exodus 5:1 ESV

It's clear what God wants: he wants Israel released. It's also clear who God thinks is in charge. He calls Israel "my people;" he thinks they belong to him. Let's see what Pharaoh thinks about this:

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. Exodus 5:2 ESV

Is Pharaoh a humble seeker of the truth? Is he truly ignorant of the LORD but open to meeting him? Or is he closed and unbending? Note the arrogance in his asking why he should obey the LORD. He refuses to recognize God's claim upon the Israelites and therefore refuses to let them go. So in asking, "Who is the LORD?" he's not asking in ignorance, but as one whose pride won't allow for a lord other than himself. When he says, "I do not know the LORD," he's defiantly saying that he doesn't recognize the God of the Hebrews. The LORD is a nobody to him.

Thus begins Pharaoh's crisis of faith, which, like any other, results from a growing tension between his faith and his expectations. Pharaoh does have a faith; his faith is in himself. He may also believe that the gods of Egypt are empowering him; whether or not that is the case we don't know. But what is certain is that Pharaoh believes that he, and not the Hebrew God, is the lord over the Israelites. He owns them, and is sovereign to direct their actions, or even put them to death if he so chooses. Pharaoh believes that he is their god.

Pharaoh also has expectations, namely, that his rule over Egypt and over the Hebrew slaves will not be subverted. Whatever threats Moses may bring against Pharaoh are inconsequential. He will have victory over Moses. He will have victory over the Hebrew people. He will have victory over the Israelites' silly god.

Moses tries again, saying:

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, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword. Exodus 5:3 ESV

Moses challenges Pharaoh's faith by positing that Almighty God is in charge, rather than Pharaoh. Moses also challenges Pharaoh's expectations, by issuing a prophetic warning of what will happen if Pharaoh doesn't recognize God's sovereignty: pestilence (plagues) or the sword might fall "upon us," i.e. all people in Egypt.

How does Pharaoh feel about these challenges? How do you feel when someone challenges your faith or your expectations? My first reaction is to square off and get ready for a fight. And that's exactly what Pharaoh does, starting in 5:4. He says, "I'll show them who's boss. I'm going to tighten the screws on the Israelites, and there's nothing they can do about it."

In v 5:4ff, Pharaoh refuses to grant their request. Instead, he increases the slaves' work load, requiring the same quota of bricks without the provision of straw. It's a shrewd and merciless move on his part; a direct attack on Moses' credibility with the people. It's engineered in such a way as to cause a crisis of faith for the Hebrews, so that they despair of any help from Moses or the Hebrew god, and return their allegiance to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's response marks the beginning of a slow-motion process of self-destruction over ten chapters, during which we'll read about the "hardening of his heart" more than 20 times. Sometimes the story will say that Pharaoh is responsible, e.g. after various plagues it says that Pharaoh "hardened his heart." But on other occasions it will say that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, which to our ears doesn't sound just. What's fair about a God who hardens Pharaoh's heart and then holds him responsible for his actions?

But as it turns out, the whole point of this theme in Exodus is a focus on God's justice. When we read of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart within the context of the story, there's a kind of *quid pro quo* justice being worked out that we can easily miss in our English translations. Several different Hebrew words are used to describe the hardship and difficulty facing the slaves in Egypt.¹ These same words are then used to describe what happens to Pharaoh's heart.

- For example, in Exodus 1:14, Pharaoh made the Hebrews' lives bitter with *hard* (Heb. qšh) labor in brick and mortar. Consequently, in Exodus 7:3, God *hardened* (Heb. qšh) Pharaoh's heart. What Pharaoh did to God's people, God did back to him.
- Or here's another example. In Exodus 5:9, Pharaoh says, "Let *heavier* (Heb. kbd) work be laid on the men." Consequently, in Exodus 7:14, Pharaoh's heart is "*heavied*" (Heb. kbd), i.e. hardened.² Again, what Pharaoh did to God's people, God did back to him.

It's no coincidence that these same words are used to describe the plight of the Hebrews before they're used to describe Pharaoh's heart. These words have been chosen deliberately to draw attention to the natural consequences of opposition to the LORD. What Pharaoh does to God's people ends up happening to his own heart. *Their* hard labor becomes *his* hard-heartedness. The Lord is responsible, because he will not permit injustice forever.

That's why the first 15 chapters of Exodus read like a divine sting operation. God is actively bringing Pharaoh to a crisis of faith. What's the crux of Pharaoh's problem? He confesses it himself in v 2: He doesn't know the LORD. So what does God do? God reveals himself to Pharaoh in many, many ways. Again and again throughout the coming plagues, Moses will

¹ Three Hebrew words are used to describe Pharaoh's hardness of heart: heavy (kbd), hard (qšh), and strong (khzq). The latter (strong/khzq) is used most frequently to describe Pharaoh's hardness of heart: Ex 4:21, 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, 9:12, 9:35, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8, 14:17. The word is also used throughout the story to refer to God's strong hand that must be used to oppose and defeat Pharaoh. The king of Egypt is powerfully aligned with Satan; therefore God must oppose him with great force. This results in a strengthening/hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

² This word is used throughout the plagues to describe *heavy* swarms, hail, locusts, etc. Pharaoh's heart is *heavy* in 7:14, 8:15, 8:32, 9:7, 9:34, 10:1, 14:4, 14:17.

proclaim God's reason for the plague being, "That you may know the LORD." With every plague comes an opportunity for Pharaoh to repent. But also with every plague, as Pharaoh redoubles his merciless tyranny over Israel, God allows Pharaoh to dig his own grave, moving him closer and closer toward the punishment that he's due.

So again, Pharaoh's crisis of faith isn't occurring in the absence of God. It's happening because God has drawn near, and Pharaoh's faith and expectations are set on a collision course. Pharaoh believes that he (not God) is sovereign over his land and the Israelites. Pharaoh expects that he will do as he pleases and God will not interfere. Pharaoh will soon discover that he is wrong on both counts. But instead of humbling himself before the Lord, instead of abandoning his faulty faith and his impossible expectations, he hardens his heart against the Lord. The more he oppresses God's people, the closer God positions him to destruction.

THE ISRAELITES' CRISIS OF FAITH. EXODUS 5:10-21.

At the conclusion of Exodus 4, Moses and Aaron met with the elders of Israel, so that they also might hear the Gospel according to Exodus:

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. Exodus 4:30-31.

This is important because up until that point, we only knew of Moses' faith in the LORD. This passage signals a rebirth of faith among the whole nation. The Israelites believed that God would deliver them from slavery, and that Moses would lead them out of Egypt.

However, Moses' first audience with Pharaoh didn't go well, at least from the Hebrews' perspective. It sparked a chain reaction affecting everyone else in the story. Pharaoh's demand for bricks without the provision of straw created an impossible situation for the slaves. The crisis becomes clear in 5:10, when the Egyptian taskmasters announce, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I will not give you straw.'" Remember that in 5:1, Moses said, "Thus says *the LORD*." In defiance of the LORD, Pharaoh orders God's people, saying, "Thus says *Pharaoh*." Whom will they choose?

For the Hebrew's crisis of faith, the foremen are in the spotlight. They had believed that the LORD would deliver them from slavery. Instead, they're severely bruised and beaten by the Egyptians. Standing at the crossroads, which way should they turn?

What should you do when your faith collides with unmet expectations? Pray! This is exactly what the foremen do. They bow their heads, and cry out... to Pharaoh, saying:

"Why do you treat your servants like this?" Exodus 5:15

Sadly, they pray to the wrong god. Moreover, they identify themselves as Pharaoh's servants! It's often this way when other idols have authority in our lives. They so occupy our thoughts that we don't even think to pray to God. They own us, and all we can do is react to their demands. Like a

cloud blocking out the sun, our idols run interference and keep us from remembering the LORD. And that's precisely why God precipitates crises of faith in our lives. He draws near so that we can find him, and in so doing our circumstances collide with our beliefs.

How does Pharaoh respond? Does he hear and answer their prayer? In 5:17 he twice calls them lazy (idle). Then in 5:18 he orders them to get back to work, without showing any mercy. Pharaoh doesn't care about or respect them. He's ruthless in his determination to stamp out sedition.

It's heartbreaking that the Israelites are so enslaved to Pharaoh that they don't even think to cry out to the LORD. How tragic, that when they call out to Pharaoh, he accuses them of laziness and sends them back out to fail again in the face of his impossible demands. Think of the idols in your own life, whether comfort, or popularity, or fitness, or success, or knowledge, or relationships, or whatever may take center stage in the desires of your heart. Do you find them telling you again and again that you're lazy, and then sending you out to fail again in the face of impossible demands?

As with Pharaoh, so also with the Israelites; God has drawn near, and is actively bringing them to a crisis of faith. But whereas Pharaoh's posture is one of strong opposition to the LORD, the Israelites are in a completely reactionary position, doing what they have to do just to stay alive. So God will be especially tender and gracious towards them. From this point forward, as God explains to Moses in 6:5-8, everything God does will be intended to reveal himself to the Israelites, and to draw them closer to him as his people. The plagues are coming, not only so that Pharaoh might know the LORD, but so that everyone in this story might know him. Before God delivers the Israelites from Egypt, he's going to show them his mercy and justice, his love and his power. This crisis of faith is going to be for their good, so that they might learn to trust in the LORD, and seek him in prayer whenever times are tough.

But for now, they're still in a place of deep confusion and pain. So instead of crying out to the LORD, they call down God's judgment upon Moses and Aaron:

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. Exodus 5:21 ESV

And so their own faith crisis is passed along to Moses, their deliverer.

MOSES' CRISIS OF FAITH. EXODUS 5:22-6:9

We practice infant baptism in our church. Infants and young children are far too young to have the kind of intellectual certainty that secularism demands of religious faith. From a secular point of view, it's a scandal that we would do this to them, i.e. subject them to a religious affiliation that they did not choose for themselves. But as Christians we see the matter in quite the opposite way. It's impossible to raise a child objectively, without bias toward religion. There's no question that parents will pass along some religion to their children. If they choose secularism because of its so-called neutrality, then they are choosing to pass along the religion of secularism to their children. It is every bit as much a religion as any other.

Our contemporary situation is much the same as that of the Hebrew people in Exodus: we're either servants of one god, or we're servants of another. As Christians, we choose to raise our children in the way that they should go. We want them to grow up knowing and experiencing the LORD, such that they never know a day apart from their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thus, as parents we expect that our kids won't just have one moment of decision in early adulthood, when they choose to leave the world behind and become Christians. Rather, we expect that our kids will experience what we experience as Christians: many moments of decision, when we must choose to follow Jesus rather than the many other idols who fight to control us. I'm not sure that I want to call all of these moments "crises of faith," because they're usually playing out in terribly mundane ways, like deciding not to click on a certain link, or opting not to say something unkind, etc. But there are also big moments in our lives, when it's clear that God has brought us to a crossroads, and we must decide to follow him down a path that doesn't match our expectations.

In Exodus 5:22ff, we find Moses at the crossroads. He had his own infant baptism of sorts in the Nile. But he was raised in Pharaoh's household, amidst the gods of Egypt. So not only did Moses need to be delivered *from* destruction and death, but he also had to be saved *to* God, before he could be sent out *for* the deliverance of the Hebrew people. At Mt. Sinai, God drew near to Moses. He commissioned Moses for this work and then he sent him back to Egypt to do it. He even told Moses beforehand that it wouldn't be easy. At the end of the last chapter (4:21-23), he warned Moses of Pharaoh's opposition and of the necessity of the plagues. But now Moses finds himself at the crossroads, at the first real test of his faith. Take a look at how he responded:

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. Exodus 5:22-23 ESV

Do you think Moses right to say such a thing to God? I believe that we should read Moses' response as an exemplary one under the circumstances. Unlike the Hebrew foremen, who prayed to Pharaoh rather than God, Moses cried out to the LORD. It's a great prayer, because it appeals to God's reputation: "God, you said that you wanted for us to know you. Now that we're getting to know you, you're acting like a troublemaker."³

God's response to Moses begins in 6:1.⁴ As far as I can tell, God's response doesn't contain any sort of rebuke. It's just a reassurance that God knows what he's doing, and that he's doing it according to his own timetable, and that he's doing it in this way in order to reveal himself very clearly to his people.

If you went to a secular university and took a class on the Bible, you may remember your professor pointing out Exodus 6:2-3 as the basis for the modern documentary hypothesis. This theory posits that the Old Testament is a compendium of different documents from at least four different authors or editors, synthesizing the divergent religions of at least four different groups:

³ The word translated "evil" in 5:22-23 is the same word translated "trouble" in 5:19.

⁴ I read 6:1 as a summary statement of God's response, vv 2-9 as the details of what God says, and vv 10-13 as a summary of the last four chapters.

the Yahwists, the Elohist, the Priests, and the Deuteronomist. Proponents of the documentary hypothesis understand God to be saying in Exodus 6:3 that he did not make himself known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the LORD (“Yahweh”). However, the narrative of Genesis shows that God did identify himself to the patriarchs as the LORD. The documentary hypothesis was developed in the 19th Century as a solution to what scholars perceived to be this very clear and inescapable error in the Bible. And over the years since then, the documentary hypothesis has often been employed by those with a secularist agenda to create a crisis of faith amongst those who build their faith from the story of the Bible.

While the documentary hypothesis retains a number of adherents, it has been largely discredited for several reasons, the main one being that people have rediscovered the importance of reading the Bible in context, as an epic narrative. In so doing, they discover that a lot of the so-called evidence for multiple sources simply disappears. This passage is a case-in-point, because it turns out that there’s a much easier way to understand what God is saying in Exodus 6:3. In the burning bush episode of Exodus 3-4, God explained his name, the LORD (“Yahweh”), not only in terms of being or existence, but also in terms of existing *with* and *for* his people. In other words, not only is he the “I AM,” but he’s also the “I AM with you.” In the Exodus, the LORD intends to show his people what “Yahweh” means in a way that he didn’t reveal to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The I AM is going to be with his people and for his people in order to deliver his people from slavery, to himself, for the sake of the world.

So where does Moses end up in his own crisis of faith? In Exodus 6:9, we see his first step after the crossroads. He had to choose either to abandon his faith and flee back to the wilderness, in order to save his own skin, or else to take a leap of faith and trust in the Lord. What did he decide?

Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery. Exodus 6:9 ESV

Moses took the leap of faith, even when his kinsmen weren’t able to take it with him. Indeed, this is where we will find Moses again and again through the remainder of this study. He’ll often be standing in the gap, believing for God’s people when they don’t have the faith or courage or maturity to do so. Moses has made the right decision. He’s living in to the faith of his baptism.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus Christ offers deliverance from slavery to all those who put their trust in him:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 ESV

When Jesus rescues us from slavery, he doesn’t make us free agents. Rather, we become the servants of a gentle and loving master, the one who made us and knows us better than anyone else. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

When Jesus rescues us from slavery, he doesn't then become our slave, so that he can meet our expectations. Truly there is no guarantee that he will do for us everything we want, whenever we want it. Indeed there's a very high likelihood that the expectations we have for our own lives will be unmet, overturned, and exceeded by trusting and following the Lord Jesus. But what happens when you follow Jesus is that this turns out to be wonderful news, because his ways are higher than our ways.

When Jesus rescues us from slavery, he doesn't rescue us from work. Rather He saves us from destruction, to himself, for the sake of the world. He calls us to be his ambassadors somewhere, and then he accompanies us wherever we go. This too is good news, because we're not made to be idle, but to be put to work in constructive ways, for the glory of God. In Jesus, we'll never be called lazy, but instead we'll hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Will you trust Jesus at the crossroads? Don't harden your heart against him. Rather, turn to him in prayer, and ask him to give you the faith to follow him, even though his ways don't match expectations. He's calling us to trust him with our unmet expectations, to put our faith in him for the sake of the world.