

Study Notes for Lesson Three

Exodus Chapters 5-7

CONFRONTATION WITH PHARAOH

The first four chapters of Exodus brought us to the dramatic point of Moses' declaration to the children of Israel that their God was about to free them from slavery in Egypt. In the last line of chapter four we read, "The people believed ...then they bowed their heads and worshipped." (4:31) They rejoiced in relief at the blessing God was promising to them. Now they knew that they had a Living God who understood what they had been going through and was going to work in their behalf.

Now imagine the tension that must have been felt by Aaron and Moses as they first stood outside the throne room with all its trappings of worldly glory. They were about to ask the unimaginable---that great Pharaoh, considered a god himself by his own people, would "let my people go." Moses had heard God's voice promise a successful outcome. But it still takes great courage and faith to walk out onto a miracle when there seems to be nothing tangible to stand on. Of course, we have all seen the movie and know the ending, but Moses and Aaron hadn't.

PHARAOH'S SCORN

Pharaoh's contemptuous challenge---"Who is the Lord?" ---coupled with his scornful rejection---"I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go!" must have been deflating to the two men. Though God had hinted on Mt. Sinai that this was not going to be simple, Moses did not yet fully understand the Lord's whole game plan. By making their request, Aaron and Moses had so angered the proud Pharaoh that he added to the burden the Israelites were compelled to bear. Now they would have to make their daily tally of bricks without the straw that had formerly been provided by Egypt.

Thus the outcome of Moses and Aaron's first meeting with Pharaoh seemed a disaster. Having to find their own straw would put every man, woman and child under bitter obligation of added hard labor. In the initial rush of relief and joy at God's promise of deliverance, it must have seemed that the promise included an easy road to the desired outcome. But when God gives a promise of outcome, He makes no assurance that the road will be smooth or short. Usually it is quite the contrary, because faith is required to stay on God's path for the long haul.

ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD

The immediate outcome of Moses and Aaron's first meeting with Pharaoh is a practical disaster. Things got worse. They especially got worse for a class of Israelites that had been having a pretty easy time of it. These were the leaders chosen by Pharaoh to be his representatives to the people. They were spared hard labor and given the added status of "officers." But suddenly their stock plunges. Exodus 5:14 says they were now beaten and bullied. Unused to such treatment, they turn to that master they had learned to rely on---Pharaoh.

But if they thought Pharaoh actually cared anything about them they were mistaken. Their complaints get them nowhere and they saw "they were in an evil case." So they complained to the one they considered responsible for the mess---Moses. "You have turned Pharaoh against us!" They didn't understand that this was

exactly the desired end. The Israelites would not all leave Egypt under Moses' command until first Egypt had become impossible to stay in. They all had to be united in their desire to go. So God made things intolerable for the leaders so that they would have as much reason as the common laborers to want to leave. This "set back" was actually part of God's foreordained plan to unite the people and prepare the way for their escape. It is often true that the Lord must shut one door that we desperately want to go through before we are willing to look for any other doors, including the one He desires for us.

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD FULLY

When Moses returns, discouraged, to Jehovah in prayerful supplication, his voice has a whining tone. "I thought You were planning to deliver this people from evil, but the evil has only multiplied upon them! Since you sent me on this errand, only disaster has resulted!" If you listen to the tenor of Moses' complaint in Ex.5: 22-23, you will hear the prototype of many complaints that Moses will be forced to deal with during forty years in the wilderness with the children of Israel. Perhaps this very experience helps him develop patience with the failings of the continually complaining nation that he eventually leads to Canaan.

God's extremely patient reply to Moses begins Chapter 6. He expresses no anger toward Moses for his flagging faith and recurring fears. He knows that what they just experienced was a tough and unexpected setback. God is not unfeeling of our weakness, but in the face of it, He builds us up by focusing our view on His strengths. "I am who I am," He seems to say. "And I will do what I say I will do. I will bring you out 'with a stretched out arm and with great judgments.' Have faith my son." God knows we are prone to fear and discouragement in the face of difficulty. In loving-kindness He is willing to renew His promises when we need the breath of faith blown back into our sagging spirits.

RENEWING COVENANTS AND CALLS

One of the things Jehovah does in his answer to Moses is remind him of the covenants He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In our discouragements, being reminded of our own covenants at the sacrament table and in the temple is a sure way to renew our own courage for life's difficult situations.

At this point there is an interesting back and forth interchange. God has spoken to Moses and renewed his determination. So Moses returns to the people, but they are so bitterly discouraged they don't believe him. (6:9) So he returns once more to God. "They didn't believe me. And if *they* didn't believe me, and they are your covenant people, how is Pharaoh ever going to believe me?"(6:12) God, the ever patient Father, spoke once again "unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt."(6:13) Here God repeats exactly what He expects Moses to accomplish. He is not angry with Moses, but continues to teach him and bring him patiently along to a point of faith. So should every parent act.

A MIGHTY VISION

It is interesting to consider the events of Moses 1 in "The Pearl of Great Price" and try to imagine where in the Exodus story this amazing vision fits in¹. Since it was lost from the Bible we don't know exactly when Moses received this vision. But at some point in the Exodus record, Moses seems to lose all fear and

doubt. Perhaps his vision occurred between the complaining verses of Exodus 6:29-30 and the resolute words of 7:6. In any case, at some point the whining protests of Moses simply disappear for good. The vision of Moses 1 is certainly the kind of visionary experience that could alter one's perspective forever. Pharaoh's power would forever seem puny and weak after having seen the extent of the power and glory of Almighty God.

From chapter 7 on, Moses' demeanor before Egypt's monarch is one of firm determination and fearlessness. Ex 7:6 exemplifies this new attitude: "And Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded them, so did they." No more fear, for "There is none like unto the Lord our God." (Ex.8:10)

When we compare this newfound faith to Moses' very human complaints and fears of the earlier time, we may take courage for our own lives. Whatever is needed for the task God will give us. In fact, God is under obligation to provide it. When great courage is needed, God will give great courage. Think of Nephi's gritty words, "I know that God the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save He shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which He commandeth them." (1 Nephi 3:7)

THE BEGINNING OF PLAGUES

We now begin the story of the various plagues that serve to break Pharaoh's iron grip. These disasters also serve as God's judgments on the land for years of the oppression of His people. This is a side of God's interactions with mankind that aren't pleasant to think about, but necessary to understand. At some point the 'cup of God's wrath' is full and mankind merits His punishment for their sins. The theme of judgment is one that is dealt with over and over again in the book of Exodus.

While we are more comfortable with the softer picture of Jesus in the New Testament, it is important to remember that the same person is Jehovah of the Old Testament. His character does not change. We will see evidence of His tender loving care in Exodus, as well as the reaffirmed truth that God eventually judges sin. We read, for example, "Mine indignation is soon to be poured out without measure upon all nations; and this will I do when the cup of their iniquity is full." (D&C 101:11)

A PROUD HEART

The terrible selfish pride that grips Pharaoh's heart nearly destroys an entire nation. There are verses that say God hardened Pharaoh's heart and verses that indicate Pharaoh hardened his own heart. The JST clarified the obvious truth that God doesn't cause anyone to sin. But perhaps the key to understanding this whole dynamic is to be found back at the burning bush on Mt. Horeb when God first reveals His plan to His servant Moses. God says, "I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand." (3:19) God well knew Pharaoh and his proud, hard heart of sin. He knew the end from the beginning but by no means did He cause the sin and pride that proved to be Pharaoh's downfall.

A CONFRONTATION OF GODS

The second time that Moses and Aaron enter Pharaoh's presence he demands that they perform a miracle as a way of presenting their credentials. It was expected that they would be so challenged and they are ready with Aaron's staff miraculously turning into a serpent. Any awe that Pharaoh might have momentarily

felt departs when his own magicians do the same with their staffs. Even though Aaron's staff-snake swallows the others, in Pharaoh's mind this is going to be a head to head competition between the gods of the two nations and he is not worried. How could the gods of a pitiful slave nation defeat the mighty gods of Egypt? Central to Egyptian religious belief was the idea that their rulers were themselves gods, having been invested with Ka, or godlike powers at their coronations.

That is why the next confrontation that Jehovah orders is such a direct challenge to Pharaoh and the whole Egyptian religious system. Nothing in the land was more central to life and worship than the Nile River. It brought them life, water, food, and transport. It symbolized fertility, blessing and happiness. It was directly associated with many of their Gods and yearly festivals. There was, for example, Hapi, the god of the Nile and Anuket, the goddess of the Nile, along with Heryshef, ruler of the riverbanks, Hatmehyt, goddess of the fish and Setet, goddess of the yearly floods.

Moses and Aaron met Pharaoh in the morning by the banks of the Nile to repeat their challenge. There Aaron struck the river with his rod and the river and all its tributaries were turned to blood. As a result the fish died and floated to the surface. This affected every part of daily life in the nation. The Egyptian "gods" had just taken one on the chin.

Though the king's magicians supposedly repeated this miracle, the real challenge would have been to turn water back to its clean state, which, of course, they could not do. If they had any power given to them from their dark master, Satan, this power could only be used to destroy, not to create, heal and bless in the way that God's power does.

Only by digging wells, a backbreaking labor, could the Egyptians find drinkable water (7:24). Suddenly everyone in Egypt would have heard of Moses and the challenge he had thrown down to Pharaoh in the name of the God of Israel. With this initial plague, Moses had all Egypt's attention.

¹ We recommend you read Moses 1 from the Pearl of Great Price as part of your study of Exodus.