

Exodus 4:18-7:7

Men at Work

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Main point: God's powerful enemy Pharaoh despises God's word, bringing misery on God's people and judgment on Egypt. God's plans are unaffected by Pharaoh's rejection, the people's fear or Moses' doubt.

Main application: Expect God's enemies to reject his word and make our lives miserable. Don't despair; remember God always accomplishes his rescue.

Olive Jones was suspended from her job teaching children in their homes by her local authority after offering to pray for a pupil.

Kwabena Peat was temporarily removed from his post as a deputy head for writing to colleagues saying he thought a staff training day had aggressively promoted a homosexual lifestyle.

Duke Amachree was fired from his job at Wandsworth Council after 18 years for suggesting to a terminally ill client that she might put her faith in God. The council told his solicitor that even if he had only said "God bless" and the client had complained that Duke would have been disciplined.

Nadia Elweida took British Airways to an employment tribunal because they refused to allow her to wear a cross on a chain round her neck but allowed Sikh and Muslim employees to wear religious garments at work. She lost her case.

I guess in a gathering this size it's likely we will have a range of views on whether it's really a wise idea for a Christian to seek to wear a cross on their person at work. And I'm certain that we won't all agree on what the best way to deal with such situations is – should we just shrug our shoulders and get on with life? Or should we pursue these things through the media, parliament and the courts? Personally I think a good case can be made for both approaches, in different circumstances.

Lots of Christians like to be rude about Richard Dawkins but at least he doesn't particularly single out Christians – he's equally rude about all religion. But it seems to me that there isn't much doubt that a lot of the kind of incidents I have just been describing are not to do with religion but to do with Christianity. For all the protestations of the Guardian reading media elite there is no doubt that speaking and acting against Christians in an unfair manner is totally acceptable among the middle class holders of political power in our country.

The most striking thing for me about these kind of incidents is that Christians always seem to be surprised by them. The coverage of these sorts of stories by Christian organisations always sounds like we're a bit shocked by it all. The Christian Institute, a think-tank and campaigning organisation devoted to issues of Christian liberty produced a report on the pressures faced by Christians in our society last year.

They said that a "growing sense of intolerance felt by Christians is made all the worse when they face hostility in the name of 'equality and diversity'. Christians wonder why they are not being treated equally and why diversity does not include them".

Christians feel, the report said, "that a hierarchy of rights has sprung up which leaves [Christians at the] bottom of the pile. This has led to a growing feeling that 'equality and diversity' is code for marginalising Christian beliefs." Well of course that's how Christians feel. Because, for many influential people in our society, 'equality and diversity' IS code for marginalising Christian beliefs. But that really shouldn't surprise us. Because the history of being God's people in an unbelieving world has always been like that.

Christians throw up their hands in horror every time a film or TV production (we don't care about books any more it seems) says something negative about Jesus – whether it's The Life of Brian, The Last Temptation of Christ, Jerry Springer the Opera or the The Golden Compass. After 50 years you think we would have learned that's just how the media works.

In fact it's not just 50 years. Because the response of an unbelieving world to God and his people has been exactly the same for the last 3,500 years. And that truth is brilliantly illustrated by what happened when Moses, newly commissioned by God to be his agent in bringing about the release of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, went to see Pharaoh, the Egyptian king...

In these verses we learn four things about what happens when God challenges the world. Four things that didn't just happen when Moses went to see Pharaoh but which are repeated again and again in history and still happen today.

When God challenges the world:
a) God's word is ignored

Moses is back. The wilderness years are over and, reunited with his brother Aaron, God's anointed rescuer has blown away the leaders of the Jews by performing the miraculous signs that God gave him. Full of confidence he heads off to his appointment with Pharaoh – almost certainly a man he knew well during his 40 years living in the orbit of the Egyptian royal family.

They are ushered into the presence of the man himself; that alone speaks of the fact that Moses and Aaron were considered important and influential by the Egyptians; imagine trying to get an appointment with Barak Obama or The Queen. No niceties are recorded. No pleasant chit-chat about the rankings in the Egyptian Premier League or the Ryder cup scores. Moses gets straight in there: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go'."

Surely that will clinch it? God has revealed himself in fire and word to Moses as the Lord. The hardened and cynical slave leaders of Israel have been persuaded. Pharaoh, like all Egyptians, was a religious man; he would certainly take notice of the demands of such a powerful god as the Lord?

Well if that is what Moses thought then he was dead wrong. Pharaoh doesn't take any notice at all. He doesn't engage in an argument. He doesn't try and tell them that the gods of Egypt are more powerful. He doesn't ask Aaron how he can be so certain that what he has been told comes from God and isn't just something Moses and Aaron cooked up together.

Pharaoh's reply is simple: Who is the Lord? I don't know this God, Pharaoh says. He doesn't mean he has never heard of the God of the Hebrews – he could hardly have had a million plus Israelites in his land without knowing anything of their religious practice and beliefs. He means he doesn't care about the Lord. Pharaoh thinks that the god Moses and Aaron believe in is so insignificant and pathetic that he's not even worth considering.

Pharaoh doesn't need to engage in moral or intellectual argument about what God says. He just ignores God's word. God's word created the universe. His breath brought about life in every creature and every person. God's word sustains the existence of every atom in existence. But Pharaoh ignores and dismisses it.

That's exactly how it is today in our world isn't it? When there is a discussion about whether people with any kind of sexual practice can be pastors in the churches people just wheel out a couple of verses about prawns and wearing clothes with mixed fibres and dismiss the subject.

When people ask questions about whether it's really credible to believe that all the vast diversity of life we see in our planet is nothing more than a result of random chance someone will say "well Genesis says God created light and then the sun ha ha ha." Case dismissed.

If there is a discussion about the fact that if Christ did, as the Scriptures Christians have believed ever since that time claim, rise physically from the dead what do people say? Do they ask about the evidence that the disciples weren't making it up? Do they suggest other explanations for the empty tomb? Well occasionally. But if your friends are anything like mine much more often they just say "the Bible? Yes but nobody actually believes what that says do they?" About 1.5 billion people do as it happens. But to your average westerner, just like to your ancient Egyptian king, God's word is not a powerful, precious and life changing thing. It's just the suggestions of a pathetic deity or his followers and it can simply be... ignored.

What happens when God challenges people who don't believe in him? His word is ignored. Not always, but usually. Not by everybody, but by most people. And not only is God's word ignored but, very often, his children are persecuted...

b) God's children are persecuted

There's no evidence that the Israelites had stopped working. It's possible, I suppose, that having been told by their leaders about the miraculous signs that Moses and Aaron could perform some had become so confident that Pharaoh would let them go that they had downed tools and were awaiting the news they could leave.

But I think it's much more likely that Pharaoh is speaking about what might happen if Moses and Aaron get what they want. Three days off? You've got to be kidding. Imagine how many pyramids and houses and defensive walls won't get built if we give 1 million people of working age three days off. That's 30 million man hours.

As a 'reward' for their cheek in asking for time off Pharaoh simply ups the work load. It seems that lots of the Jewish slaves were involved in construction projects – just about the hardest kind of work you can imagine in that incredibly hot climate – making bricks from the mud washed down the Nile, bound together with straw and laid in the sun to bake dry. Now, instead of fresh piles of straw delivered by Fed Ex every morning the Hebrew slaves will have to scour the fields for whatever cast offs and left overs they can find themselves.

The whole section reinforces and takes further the Egyptians' total rejection of God. The slave drivers and foreman taunt the Israelites by echoing the words of Moses... "This is what the Lord says? Well this, slaves, is what Pharaoh says, what the real king says: Get on your bike and get your own straw."

Inevitably the Israelites workers can't do that and still meet their brick making targets. So they are beaten and accused of laziness. The Israelites weren't lazy. They weren't working any less hard than last week. Or the week before, or the week before that. In fact they had been working for free without rebellion and bloodshed for centuries.

For Pharaoh though, the man who had dismissed God's word, it was just a short step to persecuting God's children. Once he had rejected the God of the Bible it was his word, his ideas that were the only ones that counted. Because Pharaoh didn't know the Lord and didn't recognise God's word there was nothing to limit what he could do; there were no moral restraints on him.

The way Pharaoh goes about persecuting the Israelites is by spinning a story which is completely untrue but which he brings his people to believe. Who knows maybe Pharaoh even convinces himself that the Israelites really are lazy? But the Egyptians certainly come to believe it so that the taskmasters are quite happy to beat the people for their failure to make the full number of bricks.

They don't seem to see that in fact the Israelites are not lazy at all, toiling on the building sites from dawn till dusk. They certainly don't see that the only person in this story at the moment who sits round all day in a palace doing not very much is Pharaoh!

The pattern works in just the same way whenever people are persecuted. Someone either convinces themselves or manages to convince others that there is a good reason for persecuting this group of people. They are lazy perhaps. Or exploiting the country. Or undermining national security. Or not reliable citizens.

In Britain in our own day there's a simple lie told about Bible believing Christians that is almost always the excuse used when we are given a hard time: we are intolerant. From the point of view of making persecution legitimate "intolerant" is the same as "lazy". Intolerant is the word used to justify, literally, locking Christians up when they dare to suggest that Mohammed isn't who Christians say he is. Intolerant is the word used to remove Christians from jobs they do with competence and compassion just because they aren't prepared to endorse same-sex partnerships as equal to marriage. Intolerant is the word used to describe Christian prayer when people want to

suggest it is motivate by some desire to convert people to a political cause rather than being an invitation to come and meet the God who loves them.

Now of course it's true that there are plenty of Christians, and those who claim to be Christians, who are also capable of persecuting others. Christians who have been to war against Muslims and Jews, who have tried to silence voices of opposition and who send round ridiculous petitions to stop Muslims building Mosques.

But whether the people who treat others in this way claim to know Jesus or not the root of such persecution of others is always the same; a failure to recognise God and listen to his word. And it's inevitable therefore that, more often than not, it's Christian people who are on the receiving end.

It's totally ironic of course, because there's nothing more intolerant than a society which won't let people believe and say that other people are wrong – which is now just about the greatest crime in our culture.

But the next time you hear about a film that attacks the person of Jesus in a way it would never dare to attack Buddah or Mohammed don't be surprised. The next time there's a news story about a Christian losing their job because they simply said something they believe. The next time somebody at work calls you intolerant because you don't happen to agree with the standard secular, politically correct view on something, don't be shocked.

Think back to the Israelites, stuck in slavery in Egypt 3,500 years ago and remember that this is what always happens when God challenges the world – his word is ignored and his people are persecuted.

The third thing that happens, though, is much more serious and much more tragic. Because when God's people come under pressure there is a great risk that...

c) God's people divide

After the general election in this country earlier this year the new government has spent an awful lot of time and energy criticising the previous government for everything from the size of the national debt to rules about teachers not hugging crying children at school. I don't know how many of their accusations are true, but you have to say that, from a political point of view, it's a really good move to blame someone else for everything that goes wrong. So you've got to admire Pharaoh here haven't you? He plays an absolute blinder. The cruel dictator forces his slaves to do even more work and who gets blamed? Moses and Aaron!

When the Israelite foremen go to see Pharaoh and his officials to complain and are told there is no changing the 'fetch your own straw' policy, instead of commiserating with Moses and Aaron who have been waiting for them, presumably to find out the result of their meeting, they turn on them.

At one level, of course, you can understand why they would do that. Life must have been hard enough for a Jewish slave in Egypt without the additional burden of having to find your own straw. Inevitably these guys are going to be frustrated and upset. But their response, turning on Moses and Aaron, is entirely the wrong one. They should know that it is not these men who are the enemies of God's people – it's Pharaoh. In any case these were almost certainly the same people who had signed up to Moses' plan just at the end of chapter 4.

As we read on through the story we'll see that division amongst God's people, a sense that whenever anything doesn't seem to be going well they turn on their leaders, is actually a much bigger threat to God's people than anything Pharaoh or the might of the pagan Egyptian empire can throw at them.

Even Moses gets caught up in it. He comes back to God and complains that everything has gone wrong and that God has not rescued his people "at all."

It's both comforting and disturbing to see the human frailty of Moses and his people here isn't it? Comforting to know that it's not just us who behave in this kind of way. But disturbing too – because these guys hold a mirror up to our faces and show us how rebellious and ungrateful we can be to the God who loves us.

Because we do exactly what they do. When things don't work in our churches, when people don't become Christians, when our prayer life doesn't seem to be fervent enough, when people are giving us a hard time for what we believe what do people do? They blame their leaders. There are plenty of churches I know, fortunately not here, where the church leaders are under immense pressure to back down on some things they believe God has spoken clearly about in the Bible. Why? Because non-Christians give the congregation a hard time about those issues and they want an easier life.

Mercifully, as I say, that doesn't happen in our church. But we must be careful. Because it is so easy for people in a church to act as if everything is in the control of the church leader and to blame them when things aren't just how we hoped. But that's not true. Because in the messed up world we live in there are endless things that are far outside the control of the elders, the deacons and the LifeGroup leaders.

Well if the sin of the people is to blame Moses, the sin of Moses is to blame God. And that happens in our day too doesn't it? There is a constant temptation for church leaders to wonder why God has put people in the church who we find difficult. There's even a temptation to wonder why God has put things in the Bible that seem to make our lives harder. And there are thousands of pastors who have succumbed to the temptation to remove from their teaching all the bits of the Scriptures that might make people think badly of Christians – bits like the passages we'll look at next week when God sends terrible plagues on the Egyptians.

What happens when God challenges the world and speaks about liberty and freedom for his people? The godless ignore God's word and persecute his people which in turn, leads them to divide and argue with each other. It's all quite depressing really isn't it?

Fortunately, however, there are not just three things that happen in this story. There is a fourth. The fourth thing is what chapter 6 is all about with it's emphasis on Moses and Aaron's genealogy – telling us that they came from a line of people to whom God had made great promises. We don't have time to look at that in detail now but it's summarised for us brilliantly in Exodus 7:1-7 where we learn that when God confronts the world he will rescue his people just as he planned.

d) God will rescue his people just as he planned

At the end of chapter 5 everything looks hopeless. Pharaoh has ignored Moses message from God. The people of Israel have turned against him and Moses himself is beset with doubts. And what does God say? "Now you will see what I will do."

When God speaks we learn that he is deliberately engineering this situation to be as difficult as possible so that there can be no doubt that his rescue is a mighty one. In fact, we learn in chapter 7v3 even Pharaoh's own response of rejecting what God says is not out of the Lord's control. That's a whole big issue that we'll come back to next week; just so you know I'm not ignoring it!

It must seem to Moses like everything has gone horribly wrong. As if the plan has crashed and burned and the dream of freedom is over. You haven't rescued your people AT ALL.

But God is supremely confident. No, Moses, everything won't happen simply and reliably to the timetable you'd like. Yes, Moses, Pharaoh will make life miserable for you and persecute the people of Israel in any way he can. Yes, even your fellow Jews will turn

against you and people who are genuinely part of God's family will misunderstand their leaders.

But none of that will stop the Lord's plan. "I **will** harden Pharaoh's heart. I **will** lay my hand on Egypt. I **will** bring out my people. The Egyptians **will** know that I am the Lord."

1,500 years after this, as God was about to accomplish the much greater rescue, for which this amazing Exodus of a million and more people from Egypt was just a dress rehearsal, things seemed much the same.

That time the word of God came not through Moses but directly from God himself, God made flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And God's word was rejected. The rulers of the kingdoms of the earth dismissed him. "What is truth?" one of them said: we can't know the truth, truth is what works. God's people were persecuted; they accused all who were with Jesus and the man himself they hunted down and murdered as an example to others. And God's people were divided. Even the disciples, the handful of followers of Jesus who had not cooperated with the Romans to have him murdered, disowned him and fled into the night. This is what happens when God confronts the world.

His word is ignored.
His children are persecuted.
His people are divided.

As that storm approaches, as Jesus nears the hour of his death, what does he say? *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*

When God challenges the world he rescues his people just like he says he will.

Don't get me wrong. Of course it's tragic when people in your workplace use Jesus Christ as a swear word. Of course it's sad when Christians get fired from their jobs for talking about Jesus, for being honest or for standing up for the fact that they believe some actions are simply wrong. Of course it's terrible when people make films that portray the God of the Bible in ways that are untrue.

But I want to ask you this morning who is it tragic for? When somebody at work complains that you shouldn't be allowed to keep a bible on your desk lectures that is not really a problem for you is it? You can read your Bible outside university time. You can keep it in your bag. You could even memorise it so you can think

about it any time you want. The person that is tragic for is not you but the person who complains. They are going to have to appear before God one day and explain to their creator why they didn't take any notice of his word.

The right response to the person who sends smutty e-mails round the office and especially enjoys copying you in because you are a Christian and they know you don't like them is not to get all on your high horse about being offended. It's to feel compassion for them because they are turning on you when all you want to offer them is kindness and the good news about Jesus that can give them life.

The people who ignore God's word and persecute Christians, even when they succeed in dividing us, cannot stop God from rescuing us. If you are a Christian here this morning there is nothing in the world that anybody in the world can do that will ever, in any way, stop Jesus death on the cross from bringing you through death to eternal life. The only people they are robbing are themselves.

So what will believing this mean for us? How will our lives look different if we take to heart the message of Exodus 5 and 7 this week? Let me suggest three things:

Firstly, it will mean that this week, as you head out to your school, college, uni or workplace you will not be surprised when people ignore God and give Christians a hard time. It will mean that whenever you hear a story on the news about missionaries being murdered or Christian doctors being thrown out of a country you will not be shocked.

Secondly it will mean that when those things do happen to you or other people you will remind yourself and others that God's plan is not spoiled by human sin and that your salvation is as safe when you are being persecuted as it is when everything is going well.

And thirdly it will make us compassionate towards others. If we believe Exodus we will want people to stop persecuting Christians, not because we don't like being persecuted, but because when people ignore God's word the only people they are robbing are themselves; of the opportunity to hear the words of eternal life.

3rd October 2010
Andrew Evans