

Exodus 5

This is a chapter about forgetfulness; about how quickly we forget what we have been told, and consequences of that forgetting. The chapter opens with Moses and Aaron in the court of Pharaoh. In the previous chapter they had been given specific instructions by God as to what they were to do and say. First, they were to take the elders with them...must have forgotten that. Second, they were to say, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go on a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God." (3:18) Must have forgotten that as well. Instead of remembering and sticking to the script, which was a rather polite request, Moses and Aaron decide that they can command Pharaoh to let the people go. The response from Pharaoh was emphatic. Pharaoh makes it clear that he has no idea who this YHWH god is and even if he did, Pharaoh is not obligated to give YHWH anything. Moses and Aaron make a second attempt, which is closer to God's original script, but it is too late. Pharaoh can smell their weakness and pounces.

The story makes it clear that Pharaoh does not hesitate to implicate Moses and Aaron in a plot to steal Pharaoh's free labor. He then immediately does what despots do, increases the workload of his slaves so that they will know that he and not YHWH is their god expecting that the Hebrews will turn on Moses and Aaron, making the request for release meaningless. As he does so he also casts aspersions on the slaves that they are being lazy (the word means idlers or those who relax) and thus must have free time to go and gather straw. These commands to both collect straw and make bricks without a let up in the production schedule were passed down to the taskmasters (Egyptians) who ordered the workers to comply. In the process the taskmasters beat the Israelite overseers, who may not have even been aware of the new orders.

The beatings of the overseers lead to the next act of forgetting; that it is the YHWH who will liberate the people. We know that the people are aware of this because in the previous chapter they heard Moses and Aaron tell them so, and then the people bowed down and worshipped. Yet here the people return to the god they know, Pharaoh and ask why this is happening. They do not inquire of Moses, Aaron or of YHWH. Old habits die hard. When Pharaoh refuses to relent and reminds them of his orders, the overseers know that they are in trouble, and immediately blame Moses and Aaron ("You have made us a stink to Pharaoh)...which leads to the third act of forgetting.

Moses and Aaron immediately blame God for their failures to follow orders and for Pharaoh's response, which is what God said would happen. *"I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand."* (3:19) Rather than remembering God's warning that this process would neither be quick or easy, Moses and Aaron decided they could liberate the people on their own...with their own voices.

Reflection: We forget. We human beings forget. We forget small things and large things, meaningless things, and important things. And one of the things that we often forget, are the lessons God wants to teach us. These lessons include things such as that we ought to listen to God and strive to align our lives according to God's ways and not our ways. Things such as that we should depend on God as much as we depend on ourselves. Things such as God's time is not always our time. In other words, we are to seek God's guidance and support in all our actions.

Questions:

1. Have you ever forgotten something that God desired of you? How did that forgetting impact you?
2. Have you ever forgotten something that you promised to God? How did this affect your relationship with God?
3. Have you ever found yourself in a circumstance that ultimately only God could solve? How did God solve it (or not perhaps) and how did the outcome affect your trust in God?