

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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FROM BAD TO WORSE

Exodus 5:1-23

According to the sleuths at snopes.com, the people whose job it is to expose urban legends, the story I'm about to tell you is true. Seriously. In 1993, as part of an investigation into medical insurance fraud, the FBI conducted a raid of a psychiatric hospital in San Diego. The unexpectedly high volume of records seized in the raid meant it took longer than anticipated, and the agents were getting hungry. The agent in charge called a nearby pizza delivery shop to place an order. The following conversation took place between the FBI agent and the pizza delivery man. I think you'll be able to follow the back-and-forth.

Agent (A): Hi, I'd like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.

Pizza Guy (P): And where would you like them delivered?

A: We're over at the psychiatric hospital.

P: The psychiatric hospital?

A: That's right. I'm an FBI agent.

P: You're an FBI agent?

A: That's correct. Just about everybody here is.

P: And you're at the psychiatric hospital?

A: That's correct. And make sure you don't come to the front doors. We have them locked. You'll have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.

P: And you say you're all FBI agents?

A: That's right. How soon can you have them here?

P: And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?

A: That's right. We've been here all day and we're starving.

P: How are you going to pay for all of this?

A: I have my checkbook right here. (I guess people still did that in 1993.)

P: And you're all FBI agents?

A: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked.

P: I don't think so.

Then the pizza guy hung up.

It turns out that the FBI agents did get their pizzas and sodas, though a few of the agents had to drive over to the pizza shop to pick it up.

Under the circumstances, you can understand the skepticism, the incredulity, of the guy at the pizza shop, can't you? Of course, you can. The circumstances were far different, but Pharaoh's response to Moses and Aaron when they showed up at his court with their demand that he let the people of Israel go was every bit as skeptical as the pizza guy. With a huge load of self-exalting pride thrown in.

Think about Moses. He meets God in the burning bush and hears God's voice. He raises every objection and makes every excuse he can think of to get out of doing what God is telling him to do. But Moses finally gets with God's program and heads back to Egypt. On the way he meets his brother Aaron, who will be Moses' mouthpiece in the mission to emancipate the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. Moses and Aaron go back to Egypt together, where they bring together all the elders of the Israelites, and Aaron tells them everything the Lord has said to Moses. He performs the miraculous signs the Lord had previously given to Moses (Exodus 4:2-9), and the elders of the people respond with faith in the Lord (see 4:27-31).

Moses and Aaron are now primed for their audience with Pharaoh. Their confidence level is sky-high. They are convinced this is going to be a slam-dunk. They will go to Pharaoh and tell him what God says, and Pharaoh will immediately agree to their demand and let the people go. After all, they are following God's orders. They are doing the Lord's work. They have the Lord on their side. If you have God on your side and you do what He tells you to do, what can possibly go wrong?

To their surprise, however, it doesn't turn out the way they expect. In fact, as bad as it is for the Israelite slaves in Egypt, it is about to get a lot worse. Pharaoh is not blown away by their message from the Lord. He does not immediately comply with the Lord's command to release the Israelites. Instead, he exhibits the defiance and hardness of heart that will lead to his downfall. He disrespects the LORD (Yahweh) by questioning His stature and authority and power, and he flatly rejects the appeal of Moses and Aaron. "Who is this LORD," he says, "that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go" (5:2).

Not ready to give up, Moses and Aaron try again, this time repeating almost word for word what the Lord had told Moses to say to Pharaoh in 3:18. But Pharaoh remains unmoved. As far as he is concerned, it is simply not in his interest or in the interest of the Egyptian people to set the Hebrew slaves free. Without a knowledge of and reverence for the LORD, the one true and living God, why would he?

The only thing Pharaoh is moved to do is to make life worse for the Israelites by ordering the slave drivers and foremen in charge of the slaves to stop providing them with the straw to make bricks for their construction projects. Now the Israelite slaves will be responsible to gather their own straw to make their daily quota of bricks. In those days, they made bricks by mixing chopped straw with mud and then drying it in the sun.

Far from letting the people go, Pharaoh callously decides to make life more difficult, more unbearable for the Israelites by increasing the demands on them. When the foremen (who are Israelites the Egyptians have put in charge of the slaves) complain to Pharaoh that he is being unreasonable, their complaint falls on deaf ears. Pharaoh couldn't care less. He tells them to get back to work and says that they and the slaves they oversee will be shown no mercy. For the people of Israel, life in Egypt has gone from bad to worse, with no relief in sight. This is not what Moses expected.

After their meeting with Pharaoh, the foremen find Moses and Aaron waiting for them, hopeful, I'm sure, that the foremen's appeal to Pharaoh has been successful. Instead, the foremen unleash their anger on Moses and Aaron. They curse them, accusing them of having made the Israelites a stench in Pharaoh's nostrils. Far from liberating the people, they have only made things worse.

Put yourself in Moses' place. You have returned to Egypt from your quiet life in Midian. You have taken God at His word. You have stood before Pharaoh and repeated what God has told you to say. You have done what God has told you to do. And now, what? The whole plan seems to be coming apart at the seams. The people you have been sent to help are being crushed under the weight of their bondage, and they are cursing you for making their life even worse than it was before. This is not what you signed up for.

So, what do you do? What does Moses do? He cries out to God and asks the universal human question: Why? "Why, Lord? Why have You brought this trouble on Your people? Why have You allowed this to happen? Why in the world did You send me here anyway? Why?"

Perfectly natural questions to ask. But there is something Moses had apparently forgotten. Back in Exodus 3, when the Lord told Moses to go to Pharaoh and what to say to him, He warned Moses right from the start that Pharaoh would not give in easily. He said: "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let your people go" (3:19-20).

God had promised to rescue and deliver the people of Israel from their slavery. But He did not promise Moses that he would face no opposition or resistance from Pharaoh. He did not promise it would be easy. He did not promise fair winds and following seas. Just the opposite. He told Moses there *would* be opposition. There *would* be resistance. There *would* be trouble. Just as Jesus promised His disciples when He said: "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). That is a guarantee. You can count on it. Easy is not the norm in this world. Trouble and obstacles are facts of life. But, of course, they are not the only facts of life. Yes, Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble." And Moses himself confirms it in Psalm 90 when he says that the span of our lifetime is filled with trouble and sorrow (Psalm 90:10).

"In this world you will have trouble." No one is exempt, least of all the followers of Jesus. But Jesus goes on to say: "But take heart! Don't be discouraged. For I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Yes, you will face trouble and opposition and hardships and heartaches and setbacks and disappointments in life. We all do. It happens, as it did with Moses, even when you are doing God's will. Sometimes especially when you are doing God's will.

Ask EPC Pastor Andrew Brunson, imprisoned in Turkey for almost a year now for crimes he did not commit. Ask anyone who has ever suffered in any way for doing what is right and

pleasing to God. Ask anyone who has ever experienced the maxim that “no good deed goes unpunished.”

What Moses needed to learn, and what we must learn, is that when things go from bad to worse, God is still in charge, and He will do what He has promised to do. When things go from bad to worse, it does not mean that God has forgotten us. It does not mean that He has forgotten His promises. It does not mean that we cannot or should not trust Him. No. He will never forget us. He will never forget His people. He will never forget you. You may cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). And He always will. When, from our perspective, God seems slow to act, He is still in charge and He will still do what He has said. It was true for Moses and the people of Israel. It is true for you and me. You can trust God to keep His word. But you must not let the hard things and hard times in life cause you to doubt God’s sovereignty or His goodness. In His time, He makes all things beautiful. In His time.

When you read on into Exodus 6, you see that the Lord responds to Moses’ despondency by reminding him (Moses) of who He (the LORD) is and what He will do. He says to Moses in verse 1: “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.” In other words, God is saying: “It may not look like it to you, Moses, but I’ve got Pharaoh right where I want him. You just watch what I’m going to do.”

Five times in Exodus 6, the Lord says to Moses; “I am the LORD” (6:2, 6, 7, 8, 29). And eight times in this chapter He says: “I will ...” (6:1, 6 [3 times], 7 [twice], and 8 [twice]).

He is the great and eternal I AM. He is the Creator of all there is. He is the sovereign of the universe. There is not a single inch in the whole universe that lies outside His rule. He is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He is unchanging in His character. He is faithful and true. He is righteous and just. He is gracious and compassionate. He is merciful and loving. He is wise and trustworthy.

Even though things have gone from bad to worse, God tells Moses to say to the Israelites: “*I am the LORD*, and *I will* bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. *I will* free you from being their slaves, and *I will* redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. *I will* take you as my own people, and *I will* be your God. Then you will know that *I am the LORD your God*, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And *I will* bring you to the land I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. *I will* give it to you as a possession. *I am the LORD*” (6:6-8) [emphasis mine].

As Moses had to learn, and the people of Israel with him, we too must learn to trust and depend on God when life doesn’t go the way we think it should, or when we do what God wants us to do and things, instead of getting better, go from bad to worse.

So, if – or when – you find yourself in a situation like this:
When you feel pressed or discouraged or overwhelmed by circumstances beyond your control,

When doors close in your face,
When people let you down or turn against you,
When you feel betrayed,
When you are treated unjustly or unfairly,
When you are punished for doing what is good and right,
When your actions or motives are misunderstood,
When bad things happen,
When the prognosis is grim,
When your world seems to be coming apart at the seams,
What can you do? What should you do?

Fix your eyes on the Lord. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Keep your eyes on Him.

In Hebrews 3:1, the author of Hebrews encourages us to “fix (our) thoughts on Jesus.” He is “the centerpiece of everything we believe” (3:1, *MSG*). And again, in Hebrews 12: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:2-3).

For Moses, it was not a time for doubt or defiance or even self-pity. It was not a time to turn away from God in unbelief or despair. The same is true for us in the particular circumstances and challenges of life today. Whatever you may be dealing with, this is not a time to lose heart or to doubt God’s faithfulness to His promises. Now is the time – and there is never a time when it is not time – to fix your eyes on the Lord and to stay focused on Him. Then, in His time, you will see what the Lord will do. And those who trust in Him will not be disappointed.

This is no urban legend. It is the gospel truth.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.