

CHAPTER 5

Moses and Aaron are here dealing with Pharaoh, to get leave of him to go and worship in the wilderness.

I. They demand leave in the name of God (v. 1), and he answers their demand with a defiance of God (v. 2).

II. They beg leave in the name of Israel (v. 3), and he answers their request with further orders to oppress Israel (v. 4-9). These cruel orders were,

1. Executed by the task-masters (v. 10-14).
2. Complained of to Pharaoh, but in vain (v. 15-19).
3. Complained of by the people to Moses (v. 20, 21), and by him to God (v. 22, 23).

EXODUS 5:1-2

MOSES AND AARON GO TO PHARAOH

Moses and Aaron, having delivered their message to the elders of Israel, with whom they found good acceptance, are now to deal with Pharaoh, to whom they come in peril of their lives — *Moses* particularly, who perhaps was out-lawed for killing the Egyptian forty years before, so that if any of the old courtiers should happen to remember that against him now it might cost him his head. Their message itself was displeasing, and touch Pharaoh both in his honour and in his profit, two tender points; yet these faithful ambassadors boldly deliver it, whether he will hear or whether he will forbear.

I. Their demand is piously bold: *Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go*, v. 1. Moses, in treating with the elders of Israel, is directed to call God *the God of their fathers*; but, in treating with Pharaoh, they call him *the God of Israel*, and it is the first time we find him called so in scripture: he is called *the God of Israel*, the *person* (⁽¹³³⁾Genesis 33:20); but here it is Israel, the *people*. They are just beginning to be formed into a people when God is called their God. Moses, it is likely, was directed to

call him so, at least it might be inferred from ^{<1182>}Exodus 9:22, *Israel is my son*. In this great name they deliver their message: *Let my people go*.

1. They were God's people, and therefore Pharaoh ought not to detain them in bondage. Note, God will own his own people, though ever so poor and despicable, and will find a time to plead their cause. "The Israelites are slaves in Egypt, but they are my people," says God, "and I will not suffer them to be always trampled upon." See ^{<2514>}Isaiah 52:4, 5.

2. He expected services and sacrifices from them, and therefore they must have leave to go where they could freely exercise their religion, without giving offence to, or receiving offence from, the Egyptians. Note, God delivers his people out of the hand of their enemies, that they may serve him, and serve him cheerfully, that they may hold a feast to him, which they may do, while they have his favour and presence, even in a wilderness, a dry and barren land.

II. Pharaoh's answer is impiously bold: *Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?* v. 2. Being summoned to surrender, he thus hangs out the flag of defiance, hectors Moses and the God that sends him, and peremptorily refuses to let Israel go; he will not treat about it, nor so much as bear the mention of it. Observe,

1. How scornfully he speaks of the God of Israel: "*Who is Jehovah?* I neither know him nor care for him, neither value him nor fear him:" it is a hard name that he never heard of before, but he resolves it shall be no bugbear to him. Israel was now a despised oppressed people, looked on as the tail of the nation, and, by the character they bore, Pharaoh makes his estimate of their God, and concludes that he made no better a figure among the gods than his people did among the nations. Note, Hardened persecutors are more malicious against God himself than they are against his people. See ^{<2372>}Isaiah 37:23. Again, Ignorance and contempt of God are at the bottom of all the wickedness that is in the world. Men know not the Lord, or have very low and mean thoughts of him, and therefore they obey not his voice, nor will let any thing go for him.

2. How proudly he speaks of himself: "*That I should obey his voice;* I, the king of Egypt, a great people, obey the God of Israel, a poor enslaved people? Shall I, that rule the Israel of God, obey the God of Israel? No, it is below me; I scorn to answer his summons." Note, Those are the children of pride that are the *children of disobedience*, ^{<813>}Job 41:34;

☞ Ephesians 5:6. Proud men think themselves too good to stoop even to God himself, and would not be under control, ☞ Jeremiah 43:2. Here is the core of the controversy: God must rule, but man will not be ruled. “I will have my will done,” says God: “But I will do my own will,” says the sinner.

3. How resolutely he denies the demand: *Neither will I let Israel go.* Note, Of all sinners none are so obstinate, nor so hardly persuaded to leave their sin, as persecutors are.

☞ EXODUS 5:3-9

SUFFERINGS OF THE ISRAELITES INCREASED

Finding that Pharaoh had no veneration at all for God, Moses and Aaron next try whether he had any compassion for Israel, and become humble suitors to him for leave to go and sacrifice, but in vain.

I. Their request is very humble and modest, v. 3. They make no complaint of the rigour they were ruled with. They plead that the journey they designed was not a project formed among themselves, but that their God had met with them, and called them to it. They beg with all submission: *We pray thee.* The poor useth entreaties; though God may summon princes that oppress, it becomes us to beseech and make supplication to them. What they ask is very reasonable, only for a short vacation, while they went three days' journey into the desert, and that on a good errand, and unexceptionable: “*We will sacrifice unto the Lord our God, as other people do to theirs;*” and, *lastly,* they give a very good reason, “*Lest, if we quite cast off his worship, he fall upon us with one judgment or other, and then Pharaoh will lose his vassals.*”

II. Pharaoh's denial of their request is very barbarous and unreasonable, v. 4-9.

1. His suggestions were very unreasonable.

(1.) That the people were idle, and that therefore they talked of going to sacrifice. The cities they built for Pharaoh, and the other fruit of their labours, were witnesses for them that they were not idle; yet he thus basely

misrepresents them, that he might have a pretence to increase their burdens.

(2.) That Moses and Aaron made them idle with vain words, v. 9. God's words are here called vain words; and those that called them to the best and most needful business are accused of making them idle. Note, The malice of Satan has often represented the service and worship of God as fit employment for those only that have nothing else to do, and the business only of the idle; whereas indeed it is the indispensable duty of those that are most busy in the world.

2. His resolutions hereupon were most barbarous.

(1.) Moses and Aaron themselves must get to *their burdens* (v. 4); they are Israelites, and, however God had distinguished them from the rest, Pharaoh makes no difference: they must share in the common slavery of their nation. Persecutors have always taken a particular pleasure in putting contempt and hardship upon the ministers of the churches.

(2.) The usual tale of bricks must be exacted, without the usual allowance of straw to mix with the clay, or to burn the bricks with, that thus more work might be laid upon the men, which if they performed, they would be broken with labour; and, if not, they would be exposed to punishment.

~~(18)~~ EXODUS 5:10-14

SUFFERINGS OF THE ISRAELITES INCREASED

Pharaoh's orders are here put in execution; straw is denied, and yet the work not diminished.

1. The Egyptian task-masters were very severe. Pharaoh having decreed unrighteous decrees, the task-masters were ready to write the grievousness that he had prescribed, ~~(20)~~ Isaiah 10:1. Cruel princes will never want cruel instruments to be employed under them, who will justify them in that which is most unreasonable. These task-masters insisted upon the daily tasks, as when there was straw, v. 13. See what need we have to pray that *we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men*, ~~(30)~~ 2 Thessalonians 3:2. The enmity of the serpent's seed against the seed of the

woman is such as breaks through all the laws of reason, honour, humanity, and common justice.

2. The people hereby were dispersed throughout all the land of Egypt, to gather stubble, v. 12. By this means Pharaoh's unjust and barbarous usage of them came to be known to all the kingdom, and perhaps caused them to be pitied by their neighbours, and made Pharaoh's government less acceptable even to his own subjects: good-will is never got by persecution.

3. The Israelite-officers were used with particular harshness, v. 14. Those that were the fathers of the houses of Israel paid dearly for their honour; for from them immediately the service was exacted, and they were beaten when it was not performed. See here,

(1.) What a miserable thing slavery is, and what reason we have to be thankful to God that we are a free people, and not oppressed. Liberty and property are valuable jewels in the eyes of those whose services and possessions lie at the mercy of an arbitrary power.

(2.) What disappointments we often meet with after the raising of our expectations. The Israelites were now lately encouraged to hope for enlargement, but behold greater distresses. This teaches us always to rejoice with trembling.

(3.) What strange steps God sometimes takes in delivering his people; he often brings them to the utmost straits when he is just ready to appear for them. The lowest ebbs go before the highest tides; and very cloudy mornings commonly introduce the fairest days, ~~(526)~~ Deuteronomy 32:36. God's time to help is when things are at the worst; and Providence verifies the paradox, *The worse the better.*

~~(155)~~ EXODUS 5:15-23

SUFFERINGS OF THE ISRAELITES INCREASED

It was a great strait that the head-workmen were in, when they must either abuse those that were under them or be abused by those that were over them; yet, it should seem, rather than they would tyrannize, they would be tyrannized over; and they were so. In this evil case (v. 19), observe,

I. How justly they complained to Pharaoh: They *came and cried unto Pharaoh*, v. 15. Whither should they go with a remonstrance of their grievances but to the supreme power, which is ordained for the protection of the injured? As bad as Pharaoh was his oppressed subjects had liberty to complain to him; there was no law against petitioning: it was a very modest, but moving, representation that they made of their condition (v. 16): *Thy servants are beaten* (severely enough, no doubt, when things were in such a ferment), and yet *the fault is in thy own people*, the task-masters, who deny us what is necessary for carrying on our work. Note, It is common for those to be most rigorous in blaming others who are most blameworthy themselves. But what did they get by this complaint? It did but make bad worse.

1. Pharaoh taunted them (v. 17); when they were almost killed with working, he told them they were idle: they underwent the fatigue of industry, and yet lay under the imputation of slothfulness, while nothing appeared to ground the charge upon but this, that they said, *Let us go and do sacrifice*. Note, It is common for the best actions to be mentioned under the worst names; holy diligence in the best business is censured by many as a culpable carelessness in the business of the world. It is well for us that men are not to be our judges, but a God who knows what the principles are on which we act. Those that are diligent in doing sacrifice to the Lord will, with God, escape the doom of the slothful servant, though, with men, they do not.

2. He bound on their burdens: *Go now and work*. 5:18. Note, Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked; what can be expected from unrighteous men but more unrighteousness?

II. How unjustly they complained of Moses and Aaron: *The Lord look upon you, and judge*, v. 21. This was not fair. Moses and Aaron had given sufficient evidence of their hearty good-will to the liberties of Israel; and yet, because things succeed not immediately as they hoped, they are reproached as accessaries to their slavery. They should have humbled themselves before God, and taken to themselves the shame of their sin, which turned away good things from them; but, instead of this, they fly in the face of their best friends, and quarrel with the instruments of their deliverance, because of some little difficulties and obstructions they met with in effecting it. Note, Those that are called out to public service for God and their generation must expect to be tried, not only by the malicious

threats of proud enemies, but by the unjust and unkind censures of unthinking friends, who judge only by outward appearance and look but a little way before them. Now what did Moses do in this strait? It grieved him to the heart that the event did not answer, but rather contradict, his expectation; and their upbraidings were very cutting, and like a sword in his bones; but,

1. He returned to the Lord (v. 22), to acquaint him with it, and to represent the case to him: he knew that what he had said and done was by divine direction; and therefore what blame is laid upon him for it he considers as reflecting upon God, and, like Hezekiah, spreads it before him as interested in the cause, and appeals to him. Compare this with ~~2017~~ Jeremiah 20:7-9. Note, When we find ourselves, at any time, perplexed and embarrassed in the way of our duty, we ought to have recourse to God, and lay open our case before him by faithful and fervent prayer. If we retreat, let us retreat to him, and no further.

2. He expostulated with him, v. 22, 23. He knew not how to reconcile the providence with the promise and the commission which he had received. "Is this God's coming down to deliver Israel? Must I, who hoped to be a blessing to them, become a scourge to them? By this attempt to get them out of the pit, they are but sunk the deeper into it." Now he asks,

(1.) *Wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people?* Note, Even when God is coming towards his people in ways of mercy, he sometimes takes such methods as that they may think themselves but ill treated. The instruments of deliverance, when they aim to help, are found to hinder, and that becomes a trap which, it was hoped, would have been for their welfare, God suffering it to be so that we may learn to cease from man, and may come off from a dependence upon second causes. Note, further, When the people of God think themselves ill treated, they should go to God by prayer, and plead with him, and that is the way to have better treatment in God's good time.

(2.) *Why is it thou hast sent me?* Thus,

[1.] He complains of his ill success: "Pharaoh has done evil to this people, and not one step seems to be taken towards their deliverance." Note, It cannot but sit very heavily upon the spirits of those whom God employs for him to see that their labour does no good, and much more to see that it does hurt eventually, though not designedly. It is uncomfortable to a good

minister to perceive that his endeavours for men's conviction and conversion do but exasperate their corruptions, confirm their prejudices, harden their hearts, and seal them up under unbelief. This makes them go in the bitterness of their souls, as the prophet, ~~2614~~ Ezekiel 3:14. Or,

[2.] He enquires what was further to be done: *Why hast thou sent me?* that is, “What other method shall I take in pursuance of my commission?”
Note, Disappointments in our work must not drive us from our God, but still we must consider why we are sent.