

Exodus 3:16–22

Introduction

It's been thirteen weeks since we were last in Exodus together. When we left off, we were in the middle of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush. After many long years of silence, God has "come down" in order to call Moses to *His* work – to the work of bringing Israel out of Egypt. And as God calls Moses to the work, what we really find is God revealing *Himself* to Moses.* The key to Moses' call is the one who does the calling. But Moses, like all of us, is naturally focused on himself. Previously, he was focused on what he *could* do in his own strength. Now this time he's focused on what he *can't* do in his own strength. So you can predict the result. Moses is definitely not up to the task, and all he can see is a long list of pretty big obstacles. So Moses tries to find a way out, and God continues to "call." And as God does this, He continues to reveal more and more, and more and more, and more and more of *Himself*. God does not work to build up Moses' self-image. He simply works to open Moses' eyes to who *He* is. It's not rocket science, but how often do we need the same reminders? How often do we forget that everything we truly "know" of God is because He has revealed Himself through His Word, and opened our eyes to see – and even today—*He* opens *our eyes* to see.

Whereas before, God had said to Moses, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel out of Egypt," now God goes into some of the *details*. He begins to lay out the program. He begins telling Moses not only what to do, but also what will happen. And in the process, He continues to reveal more, and more, and more of Himself.

I. Exodus 3:16-17 — "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'YAHWEH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have surely visited you and [have seen] what has been done to you in Egypt, and I say that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

Well, that sounds wonderful doesn't it? Wouldn't you like to be the bearer of good tidings like these? To go to an enslaved, and oppressed, and afflicted people and tell them that the God of their fathers—of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has appeared to *you!* And then to give them this message from the Lord: "I have *surely visited* you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt."

The Hebrew, here, repeats the same word twice in a row to give it the strongest possible emphasis: "visiting, I have visited you." It's like bolding, and italicizing, and underscoring the word. And it was intended to remind the people of the words Joseph had spoken to his brothers so long ago:

✓ Genesis 50:24 (cf. Exod. 13:19) — And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will *surely visit you* [visiting, He will visit you]."

* "The story of Exodus 3 is characteristic of the biblical approach in joining the act of God's self-disclosure with the call for commitment from its recipient. Revelation is not [just] information about God and his nature, but an invitation to trust in the one whose self-disclosure is a foretaste of the promised inheritance." (Childs)

In other words, the time has come. What Joseph foretold that God would do in keeping with His promise, God has now done – He *has* visited. “Visiting, I have visited you.”

“And ***I say*** that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Here’s more bolding, and italicizing, and underscoring. God doesn’t just say, “I have visited you... and I will bring you up...”, but rather, “I have ***surely*** visited you... and ***I say*** that I will bring you up...” God would not only comfort His people with His deep care and concern, but with the absolutely *fixed, and determined* nature of His plans and purposes for them. And what a wonderful plan it is! No more slavery and affliction, but rather a land flowing with milk and honey – just as Joseph had said to his brothers:

- ✓ Genesis 50:24 — I am about to die, but God will surely visit you ***and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.***

The difference now is that that time is not far off – it’s here! Right now! This is the time that God has decreed.

Yes! That all sounds so wonderful! But what about ***people***? Moses has been an exile in Midian for the past forty years. And why? – Because he was already a dismal failure once, when he last attempted a rescue mission; he was rejected by his own people, and forced to flee for his life from the king of Egypt. So if Moses is even still remembered after forty years, then it’s not very encouraging to think of *how* he’ll be remembered. God’s good plan and purpose for Israel is fixed and determined – including even the timing of “now.” But in all of God’s plans and purposes, has he considered the people, and what they are certainly most likely to do when Moses arrives with the wonderful good news? “God is going to bring you up out of Egypt! So follow me.” We’ll see next week that this is a very big question in Moses’ mind:

- ✓ Exodus 4:1 — Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’”

Have you ever got excited about the good purposes and plans of God, only until you remembered people? How can God be so “confident” about the future when there are so many people to throw so many monkey wrenches into the works? We might not always say it out loud, but sometimes it’s how we feel inside. It’s how Moses feels right now. Now even though he still hasn’t voiced his objection, it’s “*interesting*” that God (who knows Moses’ thoughts) goes on to say, almost as if in passing:

II. Exodus 3:18a — “And they will listen to your voice.”

We may feel as if it’s in passing, but that’s exactly what makes it feel all the more as if God is carefully making a point. “Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them... **And they will listen to your voice.**” We need to know that God isn’t telling Moses something He’s *learned*, but something He’s *planned*.[†] The point here is not that before God made His plans, He

[†] God’s knowledge is never contingent.

surveyed the hearts of the people to see what they would do, and when the results came back favorable, then He went ahead and made His plans. The point is that *because* God has purposed and planned, therefore, no matter how unlikely it may seem, the people will, indeed, listen to Moses' voice. One commentator puts it very simply: "Moses was assured of a sympathetic hearing from the elders, for the hearts of men are in the hands of God." (VanGemeren) Even the response of *people* is all a *part*, and in some mysterious way, even a *result* of God's purpose and plan. So God can say, "They *will* listen to your voice."

We're not talking about puppet strings here, or robots, or fatalism. In chapter four, we'll see that God uses the means of signs and miracles to do His sovereign work in the hearts of the people. (Exod. 4:29-31) We'll also see that later on, these same people begin to have second thoughts about listening to Moses. (Exod. 6:9, 12) There's obviously no "puppet strings" here. Things will still look to us to be much "messier" than we would like.

But in the end, the people do believe Moses. In the end, they do listen to Moses' voice. And why? Because in the end, *people* (all of them) are not the obstacles to God's plans, but always the means to their fulfillment. People are not sovereign, God is. That's a mystery. We don't understand how God works HIS SOVEREIGN PURPOSES in the hearts of morally accountable and responsible people. But we embrace this mystery not only because it glorifies God, but also because it's a wonderful and necessary comfort to us as we live in this world full of people.

So now we move to the next part of the program, when God once again tells Moses not only what to do, but also what will happen.

III. Exodus 3:18b — "...and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'YAHWEH, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.'"

The message for the king of Egypt looks like a very different message than the one for the elders of Israel.[‡] People explain this in different ways, but I believe that this initial request was just designed to show how unreasonable and cruel was Pharaoh's heart.[§] As a polytheistic king who believed in many gods, Pharaoh should be able to appreciate that "the God *of the Hebrews*" had met with them and required that they hold a feast to Him in the wilderness. A three day journey into the wilderness to hold a feast to the God of the Hebrews after centuries of slave labor? This was a completely reasonable request by *any* standard. But do we really expect the king of Egypt to be reasonable? If he's anything at all like the Pharaoh before him, he's obviously not going to listen.

So once again, we feel like asking – especially if we're Moses: "In all of God's plans and purposes, has He considered *people*? In this case, has He considered the king of Egypt and what he is certainly most likely to do when Moses comes along with his very polite and reasonable

[‡] Some argue that the request for a three day journey into the wilderness was just a "polite" and diplomatic way of asking Pharaoh to let them go permanently – and Pharaoh knew this all along. (cf. Stuart; Enns)

[§] See **5:1-9, 17-18**; 7:16; 8:1, 8, 20-21; **8:25-29**; 10:1, 3; **10:7-11, 24-26**; 14:5-9; cf. Calvin; Keil & Delitzsch; Currid; VanGemeren

request? Once again, even though Moses still hasn't voiced this objection, the God who knows the thoughts of men seems to word very carefully what He says next.

IV. Exodus 3:19 — “But *I, I* know** that the king of Egypt will not let you go, not even†† by a mighty hand.”

In other words, God can do better than talk to Moses about what Pharaoh is *most likely* to do, or what will most likely happen. God can say to Moses, “I know what *will* happen; I know what Pharaoh *will* do.” This explains why it's not deceitful for Moses to start out by asking for a three day journey into the wilderness. In the first place, they still did apparently make this three day journey to offer sacrifices in the wilderness. (Exod 15:22; Num. 33:8) But in the second place, God knew like none of us ever could that there was absolutely no chance in the world that Pharaoh would ever even consider Moses' request (“not even by a might hand”).

Now once again, we need to know that God isn't telling Moses something He's learned, but something He's *planned*. In other words, the point here is not that before God made His plans, He took a reading of the king's heart, and when it came back unfavorable, he adjusted His plans to include the ten plagues. The point is that even Pharaoh's obstinate heart has been in some mysterious way *decreed and determined* by God – without God in any way being the author of evil, and without Pharaoh being in any way less morally accountable and responsible for his own stubbornness. We'll be talking more about this in the coming weeks, but for right now can did you notice again the italicizing, and underlining, and bolding? “But ***I, I*** know...” How does God know? He knows because He plans. He knows because He is the sovereign God who ultimately guides, and orders, and directs all things:

- ✓ Isaiah 46:9–10 — I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”
- ✓ Isaiah 14:24 — The LORD of hosts has sworn: “As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.”

Now once again, we're not talking here about puppet strings, or people walking around like robots. Even as God hardens Pharaoh's heart, we'll also read that Pharaoh is guilty of hardening his own heart. Somehow, in some mysterious way, God works His sovereign purposes even in the *heart* of Pharaoh – *without* in any way violating His moral responsibility and accountability.

- ✓ Proverbs 21:1 (cf. 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Kings 12:15) — The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

** The first person singular verb “I know” would have been enough, but God prefaces the 1st pers. sing. verb with the personal pronoun, “I.” So: “But I, I know...”

†† The more common translation “unless/except” (NASB; ESV; NRSV; NIV; HCSB; NLT; NCV; Calvin; Enns) seems clearly to be an awkward attempt at harmonization with the next verse without sufficient support in the Hebrew. (cf. Motyer; Currid; Stuart; Hamilton; Keil & Delitzsch; Lange; VanGemeren; Durham; NET; NKJV; ASV; ESV footnote; NRSV footnote)

Have you ever got excited about the good purposes and plans of God for your life, for your family, for His church, even for all creation, only until you remembered the king of Egypt – only until you remembered the people around you who have more sway, and power, and influence, and authority than you have? How can God be so “confident” about the future when there are so many people to throw so many monkey wrenches into the works? And God would answer us, and Moses, just like last time: “*People* are never obstacles to God’s plans, but always, ultimately, the means to their fulfillment.” People are not sovereign, God is. That’s a huge mystery, especially in this fallen world! But we embrace this mystery not only because it glorifies God, but also because it’s a wonderful and necessary comfort to us as we live in this world full of people – even a world full of Pharaohs.

So what happens next? Well, once again, God *knows* because He has purposed and planned.

V. Exodus 3:20 — “So I will send out my hand^{‡‡} and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will send you out.”

Do you see the word play? God uses this word play to say something about Himself. God will *send out* His hand so that Pharaoh will *send out* the people. There’s no doubt about what God will do. And it’s for this very reason that there can be no doubt whatsoever about what Pharaoh will do.

And so for the *third* time, people are not sovereign – not even Pharaoh; God is. God hardens Pharaoh’s *heart* so that He might force Pharaoh’s *hand* and bring all glory and honor to Himself.

So are we finished? Now that we’ve got to the part about Pharaoh sending Israel out, what more is there to say? Well, there’s just this little “addendum”:

VI. Exodus 3:21-22^{§§} — “And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

^{‡‡} There have been widely differing approaches to reconciling this reference to the Lord’s “hand” in v. 20 with the statement, “not even by a mighty hand” in v. 19. *Motyer* sees in both verses the Lord’s hand, and explains this in terms of the mystery of Pharaoh’s resistance followed by Pharaoh’s submission (God’s providence). *Currid* sees Pharaoh’s hand in v. 19 and God’s hand in v. 20. His reasoning is difficult to follow. *Stuart* and *Durham* both understand v. 19 in terms of “no human hand” (“any power that men could muster”) contrasted with the hand of God in v. 20. I tend toward this view. *Hamilton* quotes *Addinal* without saying whether he approves or not: “It is a phrase of general meaning including every power on earth or in heaven which could enter the mind of Pharaoh.” *Keil & Delitzsch* (cf. *Lange*) take this position: “The meaning is, that Pharaoh would not be willing to let Israel depart even when he should be smitten by the strong hand of God [cf. Deut. 4:34; 5:15]; but that he would be compelled to do so against his will, would be forced to do so by the plagues that were about to fall upon Egypt. Thus even after the ninth plague it is still stated, that ‘Pharaoh would not let them go;’ and when he had given permission, in consequence of the last plague, and in fact had driven them out, he speedily repented, and pursued them with his army to bring them back again; from which it is clearly to be seen that the strong hand of God had not broken his will, and yet Israel was brought out by the same strong hand of Jehovah.” *VanGemeren* seems to take the same view as Keil & Delitzsch: “Not even “a mighty hand” (v.19), in this case the plagues... would budge [Pharaoh’s] obduracy and recalcitrance.”

^{§§} Cf. Genesis 15:14; Exodus 11:2-3; 12:35-36

I think this is the most astonishing, and “unbelievable” conclusion ever. In some ways, it’s even more amazing than the parting of the Red Sea. I have no idea what means God used, or by what secret operation God worked to accomplish this miracle in the hearts of the Egyptian people. Once again, we reject deny any idea of people being puppets and robots who are fatalistically controlled by God. That idea is everywhere *condemned* by Scripture. But at the same time, we have to remember that we were told in Exodus 1:12 that “the Egyptians were *in dread* of the people of Israel” – so much so that Pharaoh felt confident enough to command “*all his people*” to cast the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile. (Exod. 1:22; 2:1-10; cf. Stuart) We should also remember that at the time when the Hebrew women are asking their Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing, the Egyptians have just been plagued over, and over, and over again by the God of the Hebrews. They’ve endured extreme physical suffering. Their crops have been destroyed. Their livestock have been killed. Not only this, but immediately after the “plundering” of the Egyptians there will be “a great cry in Egypt, for there [will] not [be] a house where someone was not dead.” (12:30)

One commentator asks the question I think we should all be asking: “Are the Egyptians gullible or generous? What people who just have had the daylight smacked out of them are going to be so philanthropic to those who have caused so much agony and turmoil?” (Hamilton) It may sound funny, but that’s a very serious question. And the powerful, awesome, life-changing answer is right there in the text before us! God says, “***And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.***” In other words, for the fourth time now, God isn’t telling Moses something He’s *learned*, but something He’s *planned*. Once again, the point is not that before God made His plans, He surveyed the hearts of the Egyptians to see what they would do, and when the results came back favorable, then He made His plans. The point is that because God has purposed and planned, therefore, no matter how unlikely it may seem, the Egyptians will, indeed, freely give of their gold, and silver, and clothing to the Israelites.*** One commentator puts it very simply:

“It is not just that the Lord has power over all the power of the enemy, but even people’s hearts are his to sway, direct, change and command.” (Motyer)

Calvin writes:

“Inasmuch as this was hard to believe, that the Egyptians their bitterest enemies would become so kind and liberal as to exert such beneficence towards them, God reminds them that it is in His power to turn the hearts of men whithersoever He will.”†††

*** “[God] leads us to observe that the bestowment of [these gifts, which outwardly appeared to be the effect of the good-will of the Egyptians, if viewed more deeply, proceeded from another Giver; that the outwardly free act of the Egyptians was effected by an inward divine constraint which they could not withstand.” (Hengstenberg; quoted in Keil & Delitzsch) “Grace does not come to the Hebrews because of the Egyptians’ soft and loving hearts; it comes because God has so willed it.” (Currid) “So from their former persecutors he would supply those needs, further demonstrating his power and control over all people and circumstances.” (Stuart)

††† “This passage contains rich and extensive doctrine; that whenever men cruelly rage against us, it does not happen contrary to the design of God, because He can in a moment quiet them; and that He grants this license to their cruelty, because it is expedient thus to humble and chasten us. Again, we gather from hence, that we have no enemies so fierce and barbarous, as that it is not easy for Him readily to tame them. If we were surely persuaded of

Even the response of *people* is all a *part*, and in some mysterious way, even the *result* of God's sovereign purpose and plan.

Conclusion

Have you ever got excited about the good purposes and plans of God for you, for your family, for His church, only until you remembered *people*? For Moses, it was the elders of Israel, the Pharaoh, and all the Egyptians. For us, it could be any number of people; a boss, a co-worker, a neighbor, even at times a friend, or a spouse, the people in government and world power, *ourselves* – or any combination of all these people put together. How can God be so “confident” about the future when there are so many *people* to throw so many monkey wrenches into the works? No, we don't say that out loud, but sometimes we may feel that way inside. And then sometimes we go on to live in light of how we feel – timid, fearful, discouraged, unbelieving. Calvin puts it well:

- ✓ “If we were surely persuaded of this, that men's hearts are controlled, and guided by the secret inspiration of God, we should not so greatly dread their hatred, and threatenings, and terrors, nor should we be so easily turned from the path of duty through fear of them. This alarm is the just reward of our unbelief, when we repose not on God's providence.”

So the *plan* sounds good, but has God taken into account the *people*? Whenever you're tempted to ask this question, know that just like God answered Moses four times in a row, so He answers us: “*People* are never obstacles to God's plans, but always, ultimately, part of His plan.” People are not sovereign, God is. And we embrace this mystery not only because it glorifies God, but also because it's a wonderful and necessary comfort to us as we live in this world full of people – including *us*.

Childs concludes:

“[These verses are intended] to show that from God's perspective the way is clear. His whole plan unfolds before an open future. Each of the obstacles, which successively appear to grow in size [even down to the inner thoughts and hearts of men], are all part of his plan.” (Childs)

And we know that His plan for us is always for our good (cf. Rom. 8:28-30; Jer. 29:11), “according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth, in Him, in whom also we were taken as an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, so that we might be to the praise of His glory.” (Eph. 1:9-12; ESV & personal translation)

this, that men's hearts are controlled, and guided by the secret inspiration of God, we should not so greatly dread their hatred, and threatenings, and terrors, nor should we be so easily turned from the path of duty through fear of them. This alarm is the just reward of our unbelief, when we repose not on God's providence; and although we ought to take pains to conciliate the kindness of all by courtesy, yet should we remember that our efforts will not gain their favour, unless God should so incline their hearts.” (Calvin)