

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 5

Making Matters Worse

Exodus 5:1-6:30

Health and Wealth Disease

You are in danger of falling prey to an evil which lurks all around you. This evil comes as a friend and gradually wins your trust. It promises you everything you want – health, wealth, friends, and a closer relationship with God. It is the spiritual dimension that makes this evil so dangerous. It masquerades as Christianity, but is actually a distortion of true faith. It speaks about God, but grossly misrepresents Him. This evil is sweeping across the whole world, gathering up thousands, leading them into false Christianity, and sending them to hell. Here in America it is known as the health and wealth gospel.

Perhaps you have heard of the most recent purveyor of this theological trash. Joel Osteen has been in the news for his books and his megachurch. He and his wife Victoria are co-pastors of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, which is attended by over 30,000 people each week. Millions more watch the Osteens on television. Osteen's book, *Your Best Life Now*, was the #1 New York Times bestseller. As you would expect from a pastor, God figures prominently in his book. But Joel Osteen's God is not the Divine Lover who gave His life to rescue the human race. Listen to what Osteen says about God. "It's not God's lack of resources or your lack of talent that prevents you from prospering. Your own wrong thinking can keep you from God's best."¹ "God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity."² Osteen's God is a giant philanthropist who is constantly frustrated by the ignorance and doubtfulness of human beings. He *wants* to bless you, but He cannot because you will not let Him. Osteen's role in life is to enlighten you to God's plan of blessing. Predictably, Osteen appeals to God's royal authority as the basis for his teaching. He says, "...we serve the King of Kings. We serve the Most High God, and His dream for your life is so much bigger and better than you can even imagine."³

This rotten religion is not confined to Houston or the airwaves. It is all over America and has spread around the world. *Christianity Today*, a major Christian ministry magazine, recently featured a front-page article on the astronomical growth of the health and wealth gospel in Africa. All over the world people are believing in a God who, they think, will give them health and wealth – if only they believe. What they do not see is that such a God does not exist except in the mind of Satan.

The health and wealth gospel is partly true, which is what makes it so seductive. God *is* the king of the universe. He *does* have vast wealth. He *can* give you unimaginable blessings. But the gospel is a call to forsake the love of worldly success. The gospel is a message of love so profound that God killed His own Son to rescue us from our sins. The true gospel calls us to follow Jesus in His suffering. The real blessings of the real God are found within a life of hardship. Any other gospel is demonic.

Moses is a case study that solidly refutes the health and wealth gospel. Moses already had the vast wealth Osteen sells. Moses was a prince of Egypt, and would inherit the treasure of the greatest power on earth. He could have been the posterboy for Osteen's religion. But the call of God was to abandon all that. The book of Hebrews tells us,

¹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, (New York, NY: Faith Words, 2004) p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Hebrews 11:24-26)

Moses left behind the wealth of Egypt, spent his life wandering in the desert, and died without a home. By Osteen's measure, his life was a failure. Moses totally missed God's best life. Joel Osteen would have told Moses to stay in Egypt and use his wealth and influence to make life a little easier for his fellow Israelites. But God had different ideas, bigger plans, a much larger vision. God planned to save the whole human race from destruction by this slave people – and it was necessary for Moses to suffer in the process. By God's measure, Moses was blessed with the best life. This week as we continue our studies in Exodus, we will see that God's blessings are not what you expect, and when God enters your life things often get worse before they get better.

Confronting Pharaoh

Exodus is the story of the greatest rescue operation in human history. God's people were enslaved in Egypt and longed for freedom. They had come there 400 years before. The Israelites came to Egypt to escape a famine when Joseph was prime minister. Because of Joseph's ministry they were treated well. But as the centuries passed and the Israelites multiplied, the Egyptians became afraid of them. So they enslaved the Israelites and treated them cruelly. From this terrible bondage the people of God cried out for deliverance from their taskmasters.

God heard the cries of His people, and He called Moses to return to Egypt and rescue them. Moses was skeptical, and he had some pointed questions for God. God replied by answering Moses' concerns and by giving Moses signs to persuade the people of Israel that God was going to deliver them. Best of all, God promised to go with Moses and help him. After all his questions were answered, Moses finally told God he did not want any part of this plan – but God refused to take no for an answer and Moses went. When Moses arrived in Egypt he found that it was just as God had said. The people of Israel believed that God had appeared to him and that God was going to deliver them. God was faithful to His promises! The stage was set for rescuing a whole nation enslaved by the ancient superpower.

I am sure it was with a measure of confidence that Moses entered the palace to demand the release of the people of Israel. God was with him, the people of Israel believed him, now was the time to confront Pharaoh. Perhaps Moses was not too surprised when Pharaoh initially rejected his demand. Moses used the personal name of God, saying, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, “Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.”” (Exodus 5:1b) In Exodus 6:3 we hear God say, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” (Your Bibles all say “by my name the LORD” – but remember, this is a replacement for the actual name, Yahweh.) If Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not know God's personal name – if no one knew it until God revealed it to Moses in the desert – we might excuse Pharaoh for refusing to grant a request from some new and perhaps fictional god. But in giving his answer Pharaoh uttered an important truth and condemned himself. “I do not know the LORD,” he said. True, Pharaoh did not know the LORD. But he was soon to learn very much about Him!

Pharaoh had never heard about Yahweh, so Moses rephrased his demand – and he added an explanation. This time Moses just said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us.” (Exodus 5:3a) This is language that Pharaoh can understand. The ancients believed in many gods. Their universe was populated with gods – a god of the Nile River, the sun god, the god of the dead, etc. They also believed that each people had their own god. So Pharaoh would have believed that the Hebrews had their own god. But although this is true, it would have been insignificant to him. The ancients believed that the gods were not

equally powerful. The gods engaged each other in battle, and the nations were their armies. The nation with the most powerful gods was victorious over all other nations. Obviously the gods of Egypt were vastly superior to all other gods – especially the god of a slave race. Pharaoh had no reason to listen to the demands of a god which was subject to the greater power of his own gods.

Moses also added an explanation for his demand for release. He told Pharaoh that if the Hebrews did not sacrifice to their God, He may bring disaster upon them. I doubt that Pharaoh cared much about this. He surely did not care if the god of the Hebrews mistreated them, and he had nothing to fear personally from this god. But Moses' explanation sets the stage for the plagues that God will send to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites.

Freedom to Worship

Oppression or its threat – if not actual slavery – is so embedded in human consciousness that we instinctively read Exodus as a story of the longing for freedom. For Americans our own history of the enslavement of blacks and our own fight from freedom makes this issue particularly pungent. Exodus is about freedom, of course, but the freedom of Exodus is not the freedom of the War for Independence or the emancipation of black Americans. Exodus is not about politics and war, but about the worship of God. All the Bible is about God and man's obligation to worship Him. The Bible does have much to say about war and politics, but only as they pertain to the primary purpose of revealing to us the God who created the universe. Now when the moment to free Israel has arrived, we see that it is not liberation from Pharaoh's power that is the issue. The root issue is the freedom to worship the real and true God.

Now you might say that this is a pretty harsh view of God. And didn't God Himself say earlier that He heard the cries of His people and sought to deliver them from their oppression? Yes, God did say that. And no, God is not a harsh, self-centered deity. God really does care about His people, and He does long to end their suffering. But the root, the cause of their suffering is religious – not political. The problem of the Israelites is not that Pharaoh has power over them – the problem is that Pharaoh does not worship the true God. If Pharaoh had worshiped Yahweh, he might still have ruled over the Israelites, but without cruelty. Much later in Israel's history God raised up the Persians to rule over His people. God called Cyrus, the Persian king, as His anointed servant to care for His people. Serving a gentile ruler was not the problem here. The problem is Pharaoh's refusal to worship God.

This presents an immediate application for 21st century Americans. In this election season we are alerted to the many problems of our country by the multitude of politicians who claim to embody the solution to those problems – if only we will vote for them! In this country – a democracy – it is the right and responsibility of every citizen to participate in the political arena. We all – including Christians – ought to discuss the issues and vote. Some of us ought to work in the campaigns or in political action groups. But Christians must always remember that the problems of our country are at root spiritual issues. We will never solve the problems of crime, poverty, divorce, abortion, terrorism, or corruption by political means alone. All social problems are spiritual problems, and real solutions are spiritual solutions. The apostle Peter said, "...it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) and this means that society will improve only when the church repents of its sin and turns to God.

The heart of social change is worship, and the critical event is the Lord's Day service. This is the feast that God calls us to. This is the New Testament equivalent of Exodus worship. The first day of the week is when the people of God leave Egypt and go out into the desert to hear God's voice, to repent of our sins, to feast on His food, to covenant to serve Him, and then to be sent back into the world with His blessing. The book of Revelation shows that the center of the universe is God's throne room, and this is where we assemble on the Lord's Day. We cannot see God's throne with the eyes of flesh. But by faith we assemble with the angels around the throne. God speaks to us through His pastor. We pray for deliverance

from our enemies. God encourages and comforts us. He feeds us with His own flesh and blood. And then He sends us out to conquer in His name. Then during the week we repeat what we saw in heaven. We speak to each other in God's name. We confront the sinners and encourage the weak. We feed the hungry and serve the poor. We pray for peace and justice on earth – for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And as the church becomes an effective army of God, the whole society begins to reform.

We can conclude, therefore, that the miserable condition of our country is a result of the miserable condition of the church in America. Too many Christians are too wrapped up in the pursuit of health and wealth to be any use in God's spiritual army. The health and wealth gospel of Joel Osteen and other big name preachers is only the visible aspect of the rot that consumes the church. Christians in America live like everyone else. They are focused on developing their careers and making a good living. They want great sex and good children. They seldom hear a call to arms in the battle for the universe because they have chosen pastors that comfort them with messages of comforting grace. And when the message of serving Jesus manages to get through, most Americans quickly shut it out.

You are guilty of this sin. Perhaps you have not heard of Joel Osteen or the health and wealth gospel. But you did not come to Lehigh to become equipped to serve God more effectively. You came for the same sinful reasons that brought the most debauched frat guy. Even now you struggle to overcome the constant temptation to serve yourself. Each week your goal is not to conquer with Christ, but to get through the week as comfortably as possible. Some of you are like Pharaoh. You do not even know the real God who made you and died for you. This is not a call to leave Lehigh University, or to shirk your studies. That would be wrong, adding one sin to another. It is a call to repent of your sinful goals and seek instead to serve Jesus in this place. Get up in the morning, go to class, do your work to please Jesus – not to advance your career. Go to lunch, clean your room, go out on Friday night not to please yourself – but to serve others. And above all, never neglect to appear before the throne when Jesus calls you on Sunday morning.

Consequences of Obedience

Pharaoh did not know Yahweh, and his reaction to Moses' demand proved that he had no interest in knowing the true God. Pharaoh instinctively knew what all tyrants know – that people who worship God cannot be subjugated. Although Pharaoh refused to recognize Israel's God, he could see that this was indeed a spiritual contest. To acknowledge the claims of Yahweh would mean that his own claims on the Hebrews were illegitimate. On the surface it might seem that Moses' request for a three-day holiday to worship God was eminently reasonable. You might think that Pharaoh was vicious or stupid to refuse. But you would be wrong on both counts. This is exactly the materialist mentality that so plagues the church in America. We have been so duped by our culture, we actually think we can separate religion from the rest of life. We have Mitt Romney saying that his Mormon beliefs will not influence his public policy, and Christian politicians saying the same thing – and we nod in approval. You come to Lehigh and think that you can study engineering from an unbeliever and it will not affect your faith. But Pharaoh was not so foolish. He knew that if he granted this request to worship God, his hold over the Hebrews would be broken forever.

The best defense is a good offense, so Pharaoh stepped up his Hebrew suppression program. He instituted new policies designed to make life so hard the Hebrews would be unable to think or do anything except survive. And an important component of this would be to make them hate Moses. So they were required to make bricks, but without the raw materials to do so. And when they failed, they were beaten all the more for their failure. Speaking of failure, at this point Moses appears to be a complete failure. His first attempt to free his people immediately made their lives far worse. They were miserable before, but now they suffered relentlessly. And of course they did take out their anger on Moses. At this rate, Moses would be a leader without a people. Many would be dead and the rest would reject his leadership.

If Moses were the CEO of a large company he would have been fired. If Moses were the pastor of

many churches or ministry organizations, he would have been fired. Moses was brought in to do a job, and he failed. He actually made things worse. We do not accept this. We demand results from our leaders, and we measure their performance in terms of success. We must see more profits, more people, more conversions. We do not tolerate leaders like Moses or Amos or Jeremiah. We demand leaders who make our lives better.

What would you have done in Moses' shoes? Would you have been afraid? Depressed? Angry? Who would you have been angry at? Pharaoh? The Israelites? God? When you do your best and everything goes wrong, do you quit in frustration and disgust? If you try to lead a Bible study, or witness to a friend, or do something nice for your mother and it is a disaster – what do you do? Moses was upset. It seems like he was angry. But Moses did the right thing – he talked to God. Moses did not whine, or criticize, or sulk – he went straight to God with his problem, and God put everything into perspective. No matter how badly things have gone – even if you have sinned and caused a mess – God can handle it. The important thing is to take it to God.

Suffering for Obedience

What you must grasp here is that Moses was only following God's orders. This as God's plan. God knew in advance that things would get worse for His people. This is what is hard for us to accept. We are lured by the health and wealth gospel because that is what we want to hear. "God is a great king, and He wants to make you rich," is the gospel we love. But the real God does not always work that way. God does love us. God does bless us. But often there is hardship along the way. If you refuse the hardship, you miss out on the blessings. In the end Israel will reach the promised land – and they *will* find it a land of milk and honey, of stone houses and rich vineyards. Moses will emerge as the greatest leader on earth until king David. But first there will be real suffering.

The first letter of the apostle Peter is a good antidote for the health and wealth heresy. Peter remembered the words of Jesus when He said,

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me." (John 15:18-21)

Remembering these words of Jesus, Peter wrote in his letter,

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. (1 Peter 4:1-3)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:12-14)

Friends, I do not offer you health and wealth, and neither does Jesus. Those who say that Christians will have a life of ease are vicious liars. There are many pleasures in following Jesus, but suffering is an

inevitable part of this life. I do, however, offer you three treasures in Jesus' name. I offer you love – real love – not the love you know in the world. Jesus loves you with the greatest love there is – He loved you enough to die for you. But this is not some distant, abstract love. Listen to His last words before He died.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:9-15)

Jesus, who loves you enough to die for you, is also your friend – your companion – and He invites you to abide in His love. If you will give up your desire for earthly success and embrace a life of suffering, you will be loved more than you can even imagine now.

I also offer you joy – real joy – not the childish pleasure you have known until now. This is the mysterious joy of Jesus that comes even while suffering. Finally, I offer you glory. It will not be visible on this earth. To the eyes of flesh you will appear to be an ordinary man or woman. But if you suffer with Jesus, your life will be spiritually glorious – and one day you will be welcomed into heaven with the glory of a conquering hero. But to get this divine love, supernatural joy, and heavenly glory, you must give up your pursuit of earthly treasure. You must face a life of hardship. You choose – shabby love, joy and glory with pleasure now – or amazing love, joy, and glory with suffering now, and eternity with Jesus. What will you choose?

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