

No Longer Slaves: Moses messes up

I love the honesty of biblical narrators, and of the Lord who inspired them to write. No one emerges as the perfect hero, save One. No one is “too good to be true”. Most biblical heroes are really anti-heroes: morally complex, messed up people like us who find themselves doing great and heroic things, because the Lord has chosen them. Moses is no exception. Given clear directions on what to do when he arrives in Egypt, he proceeds to ignore most of them, giving way to fear. In a story studded with miraculous signs, by far the most remarkable is the Lord’s persistence with his unpromising servant: the sign of the true nature of our God.

Many of us hide fear beneath other emotions, or mask it with clever storytelling. But make no mistake: we are hard-wired to watch for danger, and conditioned by life to expect it, so that the practices of fear are deeply active in our lives. The Lord is alert to this, and at work in our lives to counter it.

1. What do you fear as you look outward? What do you fear as you look forward?
2. How does fear shape your choices?

To begin with, let’s trace the differences between what Moses was told to do and what he actually did, and what might have motivated his choices.

Moses was told first to meet with the elders of Israel, tell them what God had said, and show them some signs (4:1-9). The idea was to bring a united front to bear on Pharaoh (3:18a). Moses and Aaron meet with the elders, share the story and perform the signs, and the elders are fully on board, bowing down in worship. But it is only Moses and Aaron who go to Pharaoh; the elders do not accompany. Why? What did Moses imagine would happen if they went together? Remember that Moses left Egypt far from the good graces of the Israelite elders.

3. How readily do you trust others to be at your side?
4. What do you fear may happen when allegiance is tested?

When Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh, they get everything wrong. They are to show that they are fully God’s servants, owning the reality of YHWH in their lives: they are to tell Pharaoh that “the God of Israel has met with us” (3:18b). But this they do not do at first, front-footing God’s demand (5:1), but without any supporting evidence or counter-action. They are supposed to perform signs to alert Pharaoh to the power of YHWH (4:21), and to threaten

divine punishment of Egypt's "firstborn" if Pharaoh does not release Israel to go and worship YHWH (4:22-23). In other words, they are to give Pharaoh every chance to take God seriously, and to openly identify themselves with God's claim.

5. When you are among non-believers, and particularly those with authority, how openly do you identify with your God?
6. What would it mean for you to seek signs from the Lord to confirm His power and authority in the world?

Perhaps the most tragic action of fear in this story is the way Moses recasts God's threat to punish Egypt as a threat against Israel, if they do not go to worship Him (5:3). Perhaps Moses thinks that Pharaoh will hear better if he imagines YHWH to be like the gods of the Egyptian pantheon, whose egos must be regularly stroked, lest they turn on their own subjects. More likely, he is afraid that a threat against Egypt will have him judged and dismissed - or worse - on the spot. Either way, this is not how Israel is to know YHWH, and not how YHWH should be proclaimed in the world. The Lord is faithful and kind, and slow to anger, compassionate toward His people, a God like no other gods. But Pharaoh is denied a chance to see this as the story begins, and pours scorn on the God of Israel (5:2). In this action, above all, Moses shows that he does not fear YHWH - does not trust Him and obey - but he fears others intensely.

7. In what contexts are you able to speak about the judgment of God as a consequence of rebellion?
8. How have you "soft-pedalled" the grace and truth of the Lord in your witness to others? What needs to change?

Finally, note the end of this chapter of the story. Pharaoh turns the screws (5:4-18), and drives a wedge between Israel's leaders and Moses and Aaron. The elders turn on the Lord's servants (5:19-21), and Moses complains bitterly that YHWH has done nothing (5:22-23). His faith is nowhere at this point, and he cannot see the consequences of his own actions. Plus, he has forgotten the warning YHWH gave repeatedly, that Pharaoh would not be quickly persuaded. This isn't a quick fix, Moses.

9. In areas of your life where you face disappointment and are inclined to complain, what account do you make of your own actions and their consequences?
10. Where have you "drawn the curtain down" too soon? Where is the Lord asking you to renew and act in line with faith?

Pray for the Lord to overcome your fear, wherever this may be at work, with his perfect love. Ask the Lord to renew your trusting obedience, which is the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom.