

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 5:1-21
“Worse! Now, Bricks Without Straw”

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Exodus 5:1-21

Verse 1

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what YHWH, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.’”

- After meeting with the elders of Israel, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh. They requested that Pharaoh allow the Hebrew slaves to go into the dessert to hold a celebration in honor of their God, YHWH. This is in agreement with the instructions given Moses from the burning bush. See Exodus 3:18. The first request is not for the freeing of the Hebrews slaves. It is simply that they be allowed a week’s vacation to go into the dessert and worship YHWH.

Verse 2

Pharaoh said, “Who is YHWH that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know YHWH and I will not let Israel go.”

- Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge YHWH, the God of Israel. He simply says that he does not know this god and that he will not obey the instructions of a god that he does not know. He refuses to grant the request of Moses and Aaron. This was predicted. See Exodus 3:19.

Verse 3

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the dessert to offer sacrifices to YHWH, our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”

- Aaron and Moses explain to Pharaoh who YHWH is. He is the god of the Hebrews. They then repeat the request explaining that if the Hebrews do not do as their God requests this may bring hardship upon them and thereby adversely affect their ability to serve the Egyptians.

Verse 4-9

But the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!” Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.” That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and foremen in charge of the people: “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don’t reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ Make the work harder for the men so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.”

- The elders of Israel had accompanied Moses and Aaron to this meeting in accordance with the instructions given by God. See Exodus 4:18. When Pharaoh sees all the elders with Moses and Aaron at this meeting, he demands to know why they are not at work and orders them to get back to work.
- He concludes that the Hebrew slaves have too much time on their hands and have grown lazy. He concludes that this is why they have requested a religious holiday. And, in order to show them who is in control, he issues an order that they no longer be given straw with which to make bricks but instead supply their own straw for the process. He orders that the quota of bricks produced not be diminished by the lack of supplied straw.
- Chopped straw was used as a binder in the mud used to produce bricks. It made the bricks harder and more long lasting.
- Having to supply the straw, which had precious been provided, would mean that part of the Hebrew work force would need to be deployed to find straw. This would reduce the number of workers available for brick-making. The fact that the brick production quota did not change would present the Hebrews with a great hardship. This was Pharaoh’s way of punishing them for listening to Moses.

Verse 10-14

Then the slave drivers and the foremen went out and said to the people. “This is what Pharaoh says: ‘I will not give you any more straw. Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.’” So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw. The slave drivers kept pressing them, saying,

“Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw.” The Israelite foremen appointed by Pharaoh’s slave drivers were beaten and were asked, “Why didn’t you meet your quota of bricks yesterday or today, as before?”

- There was a division of the work force in Egypt. The “slave drivers” were Egyptians appointed to watch over the Hebrew slaves. The “foremen” were Hebrews appointed to keep the Hebrews working to meet their daily quota of bricks. Pharaoh’s new order required that some of the slaves be deployed to gather straw while others made bricks.
- As a result of the Pharaoh’s order, brick production slowed because some of the slaves were deployed to gather straw. The slave drivers punished the foremen because the daily quotas were not met.
- The bottom line is that things became worse for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt because of Moses’ visit with Pharaoh.

Verse 15-16

Then the Israelite foremen went and appealed to Pharaoh: “Why have you treated your servants this way? Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, ‘Make bricks!’ Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people.”

- The foremen, who were being beaten because the slaves could not meet the brick quota, went to Pharaoh about the “no straw” order. They pointed out to him that the order made it impossible for them to meet their quota. They said that the fault was not with the slaves but with those who refused to give them straw. This was probably a bad approach to use as they were actually criticizing Pharaoh to Pharaoh, as he was the one who issued the “no straw” order.

Verse 17-18

Pharaoh said, “Lazy, that’s what you are -- lazy! That is why you keep saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to YHWH.’ Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce you full quota of bricks.”

- In response to the accusation of the foremen, Pharaoh simply repeats his charge that the Hebrews are lazy. He gives as evidence of this charge, that they want to take a week off to worship their God. He then repeats the previous order, that they get back to their jobs, that no straw will be given to them, and that their daily brick quota will remain the same.

Verse 19

The Israelite foremen realized they were in trouble when they were told, “You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you each day.”

- The Hebrews realize the practical consequences of their decision to follow God. This decision has brought hardship upon the nation.

Verse 20-21

When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, ‘May YHWH look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’

- The foremen met with Moses and Aaron and called down God’s judgment upon Moses and Aaron because they had made their lives harder. They even exaggerated the facts claiming that now Pharaoh’s officials were ready to kill them.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Worse! Now, Bricks Without Straw*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)