

## STUDIES IN EXODUS No. 6

Exodus 4:18-31

April 3, 2005

### Review

We have completed the momentous conversation that the Lord had with Moses at the burning bush. The stage has been set for Moses' encounter with the Egyptian court.

### Text Comment

- v.18 Remember, Jethro is another name for Moses' father-in-law, Reuel. Moses, as you recall, was quite far from home when he saw the bush burning but not being consumed. He had to drive his father-in-law's flocks back home before he could do anything else. The fact that Moses, now not simply a grown man but a man of years, should ask Jethro for permission to leave indicates something of the decidedly patriarchal household structure in the ancient Near East. By marrying his daughter, Moses became a member of Jethro's family, subject to his authority. The fact that Moses refers to the Israelites as "my brethren" reminds us that he has not forgotten his roots, and the fact that he wonders if they are still alive reminds us of the severity of the Egyptian persecution. This is a summary but it does suggest that Moses had not told Jethro everything about his past and was not now telling everything about what he was returning to Egypt to do. Naturally, his father-in-law would have been much more concerned, more reticent to let his family go if he knew the whole story. Or is the explanation more personal? Calvin says simply that men have difficulty speaking of God and talk more freely about just human emotions and affairs.
- v.19 Now Moses' request is explained. The report of the conversation with the Lord at the burning bush did not end with a specific command to leave at once, but now we learn that, once Moses had returned from Horeb to Midian, this is precisely what the Lord had said. At that time the Lord, fully aware of Moses' hesitancy, also assured Moses that it was safer for him to return than he would have thought. Those who had been actively seeking his life were dead (cf. 2:15). The Pharaoh of Moses' adulthood had died and been replaced by another (cf. 2:23). This is another indication of the length of time that Moses had lived in Midian. This also explains why no mention is made of Moses' earlier life in Egypt as part of the court when Moses returns to Egypt. He is introduced neither as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess nor as a fugitive from Egyptian justice. Those who knew him as such are no longer in the picture. [Childs, 102]
- v.20 Now that he knew he need have no great fear for his personal safety, he decided to take his family with him. Only one son has been named so far (2:22) and only one son will figure later in the episode in vv. 24-26. Two sons will be mentioned in 18:2. It is difficult to know how to take the plural here. It is possible, Hebrew scholars tell us, that the original spelling, the ancient spelling was ambiguous as to number and was read as a plural instead of as a singular by mistake. If that is the case, then the second son was

born subsequent to Moses' departure from Midian. Here is another "holy family" going by donkey to Egypt!

The staff that changed into a snake is now "the staff of God." It is no longer the shepherd's staff that it was before and is now what it will remain through the rest of the book of Exodus: a sign of God's power in Moses' hand.

- v.21 The Lord's "hardening" Pharaoh's heart is a refrain we will hear often in the next several chapters. We will consider its meaning then.
- v.23 Anticipating the entire course of events to follow the Lord tells Moses that by the signs, the great proving miracles he will perform through Moses, he will demonstrate the reality of his presence and his faithfulness to his covenant with Israel. Whose firstborn will survive in this contest of power? The Lord's or Pharaoh's? All the evidence of sight and sense would suggest that Pharaoh would be greater than Moses; but the Lord is with Moses! At the end – the last of the ten plagues – this becomes punishingly clear. Yahweh himself will kill the firstborn, without Moses' involvement. And that killing will be an act of justice, redressing the wrong that Pharaoh had done to Israel, killing, as he had no doubt, many Israelites in the course of his persecution.
- v.24 What follows in the next three verses everyone admits is the most enigmatic text in the book of Exodus. Even the best and most theologically reliable scholars admit that there are questions here difficult or impossible to answer, even if the general gist or point is clear enough. The text does not explicitly explain why the Lord was about to kill the one he had so recently commissioned; it does not explain in what form the Lord's attack came (had Moses fallen sick; is that why he didn't act, because he couldn't); and it does not explain how Zipporah understood what needed to be done. These questions are not the point. In these respects, it is not unlike the account of Balaam's ass, when Balaam, on his way, is angrily confronted by the angel of the Lord *after* the Lord had given him permission to go (Num. 22:20,22).
- v.25 Whether Zipporah acted because Moses was incapable of acting, under the Lord's attack as he was, or because she understood better than he what was needed to be done is also not explained. In any case it was a most irregular circumcision. It was not done on the appointed day, the 8<sup>th</sup> day, it was performed by a woman, etc. But, as Richard Baxter observed long ago, "It is better that men should be disorderly preserved than orderly damned, and that the church be disorderly preserved than orderly destroyed." [Cited in Evans, *Daniel Rowland*, 58] There is other evidence in the Bible – for example, the Passover observed in Hezekiah's day – that the Lord does not stand on the ceremonial regulation if it interferes with the faithful exercise of the sacrament by those who wish to honor the Lord in it.

The text is ambiguous as to whether Zipporah touched Moses or her son with the foreskin. It is also not clear whether "feet" in this context is a euphemism for the private parts. If it was Moses she touched, then support is found for the interpretation that it is perhaps Moses who had not been circumcised and who is now regarded as being

circumcised. He was, after all, raised in Egypt where circumcision was performed on adult males, not infants, and prior to marriage. In this case, then, the circumcision of Gershom would have been a kind of substitutionary or vicarious circumcision on his father's behalf. That would explain why Zipporah then refers to Moses as a "bridegroom of blood to me." That phrase, it is thought by some, must have come from the ancient Near Eastern practice of circumcision prior to marriage. [Durham, 59] If it were Gershom, however, that Zipporah touched with the foreskin, then that explanation is unlikely to be the correct one and the circumcision that was wanting was that of Moses' son, not of Moses himself. That is the conclusion of more commentators than the former interpretation. They argue that it would have been unlikely for Moses, even had he not been circumcised in his Israelite home before being put in the Nile, not to have been circumcised, having lived well into his adult life in Egypt. [Ellison, 27-28] That only one son is circumcised on this occasion, if two were actually present, would suggest that the other had been circumcised, though why that should have been the case is not clear.

Flint knives were used for circumcision – that is, they were the ritual instrument of circumcision – both in Israel (Josh 5:2-9) and in Egypt.

- v.26 One thing is eminently clear: this episode concerns circumcision. It is the narrator who adds the explanatory comment of v. 26, whatever precisely it is understood to mean. He tells his readers that her statement concerned circumcision, the circumcision that she just performed. Either Moses had not been circumcised or, as is more likely, his son had not been. This failure was a capital error on Moses' part, one so grave as to lead the Lord to threaten his life, no matter the calling that he had just given him. Clearly Moses was being held culpable for this omission and when Zipporah righted the wrong Moses was free to go and continue with his assignment. [Cf. Childs, Cassuto; Cole]

In any case, what Zipporah meant by saying "bridegroom of blood" is not now clear. All we know for sure is that she said what she said in reference to the circumcision.

Another thing that is clear is that in making the promise in v. 23 that Yahweh would kill the firstborn sons of Egypt, he was making no idle threat. There is a dark, wrathful, lethal side to Yahweh's character!

- v.28 Aaron's role, remember, has already been discussed at the burning bush. Now he is brought into the picture and up to speed on what has already been said and done.
- v.30 Aaron speaks for Moses, which was the plan, and also is given power, as Moses' deputy, to perform the miraculous signs. This is akin to the disciples of the Lord being able to perform the same powers that he was performing. Aaron was Moses' older brother, so his submitting himself to Moses as his assistant is to his credit. In 4:14 he is referred to as Aaron the Levite. That may mean that he already had some spiritual authority in Israel. That fact would make his taking second place to his younger brother Moses even more commendable. "It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well."

v.31 Everything falls out as God said it would – despite Moses’ concerns on this point, the people receive him as their leader and believe what he tells them about his encounter with God – and Moses and Aaron are poised to begin their negotiations with Pharaoh. And, as so often in the Bible, the people look right past the messengers – as they should – to the Lord whose word and power the messengers are wielding. When God is at work, even through men, people know it.

Now, without a doubt, there are two fundamental lessons here, besides those that arise from the place of this narrative in the larger context. The passage ends with God’s words to Moses being proved true: the people do believe and do accept his authority. But along the way we have two other lessons of great importance taught with great emphasis.

The first I will only mention. It is this: no one has a right to represent God who is deliberately disobeying his revealed will. [Ellison, 28] This will not be the last time that this point is made in similar ways. Remember the call of Gideon in Judges 6. God came to him and told him that he was going to use Gideon to strike down the Midianites, Israel’s powerful enemy. But before he could serve the Lord in that way, he was required to cleanse the apostasy from his own home. Remember Gideon and his father were sponsors of a shrine to Baal in their hometown. And so Gideon was ordered to destroy the shrine. Only then could he serve the Lord with God’s blessing. And a similar point is being made here. Moses can serve only when he has righted the wrong in his own home. Surely one reason for the ineffectual ministry of so much of what passes for the Christian ministry today is that the ministry itself lies under God’s judgment for its unbelief and disobedience.

But the other lesson is the one I want to pay attention to this evening. However we read vv. 24-26 it is a demonstration of the immense importance of circumcision. Again and again the Lord has identified himself in these opening chapters as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant he made with the patriarchs and, in them, with Israel. To have overlooked this obligation or, worse, to have ignored it, was a crime of consequence in the Lord’s eyes.

Now, without a doubt the importance of circumcision could be overplayed. As with baptism in the new epoch, one could place his confidence in the rite, as if being circumcised meant that one was, *ipso facto*, at peace with God. And we know very well that this error has been made both *de jure* and *de facto* throughout the church’s history. Sometimes, whether in Israel during the days of the prophets, or in the theology of the Roman church or the Orthodox church, a place, an intrinsic power, a virtue, a working has been attributed to the church’s rites that is not taught in the Bible. One of the great protests of the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was made against precisely this assumption, based on the teaching of the church, that righteousness with God came with the washing of baptism itself. That righteousness was in the water and came with the water and made a person righteous before God in the biblical sense of the pardon of sins and justification. And similar things, as you know, were said about the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Those are typical errors of the human heart, making salvation more mechanical than personal, less demanding than more, and so it is no surprise that they were committed in the ancient epoch and were committed again in the new epoch. They represent a tendency of the human heart, to make salvation more outward than inward, more a matter of performance than

faith and the commitment of the heart, and simpler and easier rather than more complicated and difficult. And, of course, in all its forms, this *sacerdotalism*, this overemphasis on the rites of priestcraft, diminishes the *solus Christus*, the *Christ alone* of the gospel. Allowed to think in this way, the application of salvation is not primarily our personal embrace of Christ's gift of life, not our heart-felt understanding that he and he alone has made us right with God, but now Christ is at a remove, he is back, often far back, behind the rites of the church. In fact, in its worst forms, Christian ritualism requires merely the performance of the rites in the manner approved in the church and does not require any living communion with Christ or demonstration in one's words and deeds of love for him. The fact is, vast multitudes of people in the ritualistic churches have been led to believe, what, alas they were happy to believe, viz. that they could live their lives pretty much as any unbeliever would live his, so long as they were baptized and came from time to time to partake of the Mass. In their case the sacraments were nothing but, as Richard Sibbes put it long ago, "seals to a blank."

Now there is nothing controversial about saying *that* to a congregation of rock-ribbed Protestants. We cut our teeth on texts like these:

"The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh...even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart." [Jer. 9:25-26]

"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit..." [Rom. 2:28-29]

"For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ... Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert." [1 Cor. 10:1-5] *And there are a great many texts that make the same point, as you know.*

And why? The author of Hebrews tells us. That generation of Israel had the Gospel preached to them but they did not respond to the gospel in faith. It is the emphatic teaching of large stretches of Holy Scripture that having submitted to the ritual life of the church is not only not necessarily the means of salvation, it has not even been the demonstration of salvation for the largest part of those who have been numbered as members of the church through the ages. In history so far, more circumcised or baptized people have died unsaved than saved. That seems clearly to be the implication of the Bible's teaching and of the weight of church history when viewed from a biblical perspective.

But, we have studied Holy Scripture together as a congregation to know by now that errors can and will be made on one side as on the other and are likely to be made at either end of the continuum. And our Reformed tradition, much as we love it and as grateful as we are for it in so many ways, as loyal to the Bible as it has been, not infrequently erred in the opposite way when it came to the rituals, the sacraments of the church. Perhaps that is not so surprising after all. The Reformation was a protest against a false faith in the rituals of baptism and Lord's Supper, a

denial of the saving power that the church was then teaching lay in those rites themselves and in other rites as well. It is perhaps understandable that the heirs of the Reformation tended to minimize the rituals, the sacraments of the church in their effort to redress longstanding error and, especially, in their tendency to see the sacraments in terms of the 16<sup>th</sup> century debate. We all do that. There have been any number of Christians who, in protest against a fundamentalist prohibition against wine drinking, have made too much of wine and drunk too much of it. The tension between too much and too little freedom is hard to maintain and so it is with the tension between making too much of the sacraments and making too little.

Now, I'm certainly not saying that the Reformed tradition *said* that the sacraments were unimportant. Indeed, the early Reformers typically had a higher view of the sacraments and their role in a believer's life than did their spiritual descendants. But minimize the sacraments is what they *did*.

Infant baptism was practiced to be sure, but, through the centuries since, in many, perhaps in most Reformed churches the practice of baptism did not change the way the church's children were perceived or treated the way it should have. The children of the covenant were baptized in the ritual sense, but they were still widely viewed as and treated as if they had *not* been baptized; as if they were not members of the church; as if they were not to be numbered among the saints and treated as Christians needing to be disciplined like any other Christian of whatever age.

And, of course, in the case of the Lord's Supper, the minimization of the sacrament was profoundly demonstrated by its infrequency: in some Reformed churches once a year, in many Reformed churches only twice a year, in most others only four times a year. And so it was *for centuries*. And not only in the matter of frequency. One can even find Reformed authorities taking the view that a man or woman who is joyfully confident of his state of grace can actually do without the sacrament. [Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 609] It is painful to hear a Roman Catholic scholar like the late Louis Bouyer, one of the most influential scholars of Christian worship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, speak of the Reformed Lord's Supper as *empty*, but there is and has been, alas, truth in that accusation and the truth is found in the fact that, as a great many people in the Reformed tradition would tell you, looking back on their lives and the place of the Lord's Supper in their lives, the Lord's Supper could have disappeared and it wouldn't have changed a thing. They were not taught to think that the Lord's Supper was an essential part of their spiritual nourishment, that they depended upon it in any substantial way, that it was vital to them, and the obvious proof of that was that they hardly ever observed it. A Christian in our tradition, for centuries on end, went for months at a time never thinking about the Lord's Supper. And, if the truth be told, apart from certain arguments that might be had with Baptists and the like, they hardly ever thought about their baptism either. We condemned the Quakers for removing the sacraments from Christian life and worship, but, in many ways, many Reformed people were *de facto* Quakers. I confess this of myself. I certainly never grew up thinking that the Lord's Supper had any vital connection to my life and spiritual welfare. And, though my father cared more and said more about the sacrament than others in our tradition, I can't remember in our churches ever being encouraged to think about my baptism in any particular way or to think of it as fundamental to my Christian identity.

We have, of course, in this congregation, admitted that our theological tradition was in serious practical error by moving, as we have, to every Sunday communion and I know that many of you have found the Supper an increasingly important part of your lives since it has become a regular part of our Lord's Day worship. But tonight we have before us circumcision, the OT counterpart of baptism.

Listen to the New Testament and to the artless way in which *baptism* is placed in the very center of the appropriation of salvation by human beings.

“Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” [Acts 2:38]

“And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” [Acts 22:16]

“What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” [Rom. 6:1-3]

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” [Gal. 3:26-27]

And a number of other texts like those.

You read those texts and others like them and realize in a moment that a failure on the part of a New Testament Christian to be baptized was a serious lapse, a sign of infidelity, a culpable non-participation in the way of salvation as that way has been revealed by God in his Word. It is true that many who are baptized are not saved, as it was true that many who were circumcised were not. Without faith it is impossible to please God. But one does not define the positive by the negative.

For example, it is also true that many who profess faith in Christ are not in fact saved. Jesus made a point of preparing us for this discouraging reality. Think of his parable of the Sower and the soils. Not all who received the seed of the Word produced fruit. But the fact that profession of faith in Christ is often false does not make it any less important and it certainly does not make it an empty act on the part of those who *do* believe. In the same way, the fact that baptism is an empty rite for many does not make it so for the Lord's true people and the fact that without circumcision of the heart circumcision of the flesh is worse than useless doesn't make circumcision any less useful to those who are the Lord's true sons and daughters. But Western Christians have a special problem with the sacraments because we cannot so easily describe their manner of working. Symbols, rituals, and the Lord's mystical working are harder for us to grasp than hymns of praise or sermons. But these sacraments are also God's way with us; also means to form and grow our faith.

God himself has made this ritual of circumcision, now baptism, the ritual by which one becomes a member of Christ's church and God's family. To despise it, as Moses did, is to despise that membership. To think *it* dispensable is to treat membership in God's covenant community as dispensable. To realize that it is what the Lord has made it, the doorway to the communion of the redeemed, makes it precious beyond words. If only faith can see that in a time when so many unbelievers are baptized, well, that isn't the only thing that only faith sees. Faith has to believe many things against the evidence of our eyes. And so here. Faith must believe in the power of baptism and the Lord's Supper even when they seem to have no effect upon and bear no fruit in the lives of so many. Our culture gives us an illustration of the solemn power of a rite, rightly understood, a power that remains even when the substance lying beneath and behind that rite is largely missing. We still make a great deal of weddings in our culture and Christians do as well, even though so many of these weddings now lead so soon to divorce and failure. But we are not to give up weddings because so many can't make a marriage work. We who understand what marriage is and does should continue to prize the wedding and place great importance on it. Faith is supposed to lead to action and, in this case, to great appreciation, to solemn recognition, and to the treatment of the rite with the same seriousness with which God has spoken of it and treated it in his Word. And there is not a place in all of the Bible in which we see God treating the initiatory rite of the covenant with greater seriousness than here in Exodus 4. Here is God himself, *after the burning bush, after his calling Moses*, now prepared to kill him for his offence against circumcision.

We take this strange but powerful episode to heart when we realize for ourselves the importance of baptism, circumcision's new form in the new epoch; when we are scrupulously careful to seek it for ourselves and our children; when we take with full seriousness the baptism of others and treat them accordingly as members of Christ's church, when we make a point of reminding those in the church who are not interested in living a Christian life that "the water of baptism can never be wiped from the brow," [Duncan, *Just a Talker*, 9] and that "the most awful thing for the impenitent must be to die with the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sealed upon the forehead." [9-10]

We take Exodus 4 seriously when we teach our children that they have been baptized and that they must live in faithfulness to that act by which they were introduced into the membership of God's household. We take Exodus 4 seriously when we reverence the Lord's Supper, never miss it if we can prevent it, give our hearts and minds actively and soberly and joyfully to our participation in it and eagerly look to the Lord for his blessing from it.

The fact is, the sacraments matter to the Lord and if they matter to him they should matter to us. He often depicts our belonging to him in terms of these rites and rituals and, if we care to belong to him, we should love them and treat them with the deepest respect and look to their use with a lively faith. Because it is a regular, public, visible part of our Christian life and worship, it is a constant summons to the exercise of true faith, hope, and love. Because they are Christ's gifts to us, we can be sure they are of great benefit, even if we do not know how to calculate that benefit. People who respond to that summons to live sacramentally with a ready will go to heaven.