

**Study Notes: Exodus 5:1-21**  
**July 12, 2026: “Uh-Oh!”**  
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***Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’” Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.”***

- After Moses and Aaron met with the elders, they went to Pharaoh. They came to Pharaoh with a command rather than a request, directly from YHWH. Pharaoh was to let the people go so they might hold a festival of worship in the wilderness.
  - The New American Commentary gives insight on the phrase Moses spoke to Pharaoh, “Here is the first actual use in the Bible of the prophetic messenger speech formula ‘Thus says the Lord’ (*kōh ’āmar yahweh*, here translated by the NIV as “This is what the Lord ... says”). In 4:22 Moses was taught this form in advance of the requirement to use it; now he and Aaron did indeed use it.”
- Pharaoh had many gods, in fact, in his role as Pharaoh, he was considered to be a god. His response to the command was to question YHWH’s right to command him, the leader of Egypt. Pharaoh said he did not know YHWH, therefore he would not let the people go.
  - The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “Pharaoh, who was considered by his fellow Egyptians an incarnation of the deity Horus (son of Isis and Osiris) and generational son of Ra, has no respect for the God of the Hebrews...Since Yahweh is not part of the Egyptian pantheon, Pharaoh does not consider Him worthy of reverence.”
- Throughout the confrontation with Pharaoh over this and the next chapters, there is a temptation to misread this as a human conflict. The New American Commentary explains the actual nature of this conflict, “The reader must not lose sight of the identity of the combatants. It is easy to assume that the contest for Israelite deliverance was between Moses and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Egypt. It was none of these. Rather, it was between Yahweh and Egypt’s gods, the pharaoh being a devotee of, representative of, and human focal point for those gods.”

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

- To reiterate their request, Moses and Aaron further explained that YHWH was calling them to take a three-day journey to offer sacrifices. If the people did not do this, YHWH would strike with plagues or the sword.
  - The words of Moses and Aaron may be meant as a warning to Pharaoh, because if the people were struck with disease or sword, that would limit Pharaoh’s work force and any disease may spread to the Egyptians, as well.

- This statement also foreshadows what YHWH would do to Pharaoh and his people because of Pharaoh's stubborn disobedience.
- Pharaoh is referred to as the king of Egypt in these verses, which serves to set him against YHWH, the true king. Pharaoh questioned Moses and Aaron's motives, and then called the people to get back to their work of serving him.
- Pharaoh's concern was two fold. First, without work, the people would organize and rebel. Second, he would lose his large slave labor force. Moses and Aaron were asking for rest, which Pharaoh was unwilling to give.

***That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers 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 people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies."***

- Rather than setting the people free, Pharaoh further oppressed the people. He did not decrease their work load, and no longer supplied the people with the straw needed for making bricks. The people were forced to work harder.
  - The New American Commentary explains, "The remedy proposed by the king was predictable: if work was the way to *keep* the Israelites quiet and obedient (a method that had worked well for decades), more work was the way to *restore* quiet and obedience."
- The overseers were told that the people were lazy and that was at the heart of their request to go worship. Pharaoh's desire was to keep the people busy to prevent the people from listening to what Moses and Aaron were saying.
- Pharaoh called the words of YHWH, spoken through Moses and Aaron, lies. The New American Commentary adds, "To him [Pharaoh], Yahweh's words were not valid; they were just *lies*. This is ever the view of the nonbeliever: God's words are *lies* that keep you from conforming to the expectations of the world you live in and from enjoying life on your own terms (a concept that began early in human history, according to Gen 3:4)."

***Then the slave drivers and the overseers 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." And Pharaoh's slave drivers beat the Israelite overseers they had appointed, demanding, "Why haven't you met your quota of bricks yesterday or today, as before?"***

- After Pharaoh's command, the overseers and slave drivers forced the people into the new working arrangement. Of course, the people struggled to make bricks without straw, but the overseers kept pressing, and even beat the Israelite overseers, asking them why they hadn't met their quota.
- For the people, things got worse after Moses and Aaron's meeting with Pharaoh. The New American Commentary explains that this illustrates a truth about obedience to God, "God's people must not assume that carrying out his commands will increase their own comfort."

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

- The Israelite overseers appealed directly to Pharaoh, and asked why they were being treated this way. Pharaoh responded by calling the people lazy, and reminded them of what Moses and Aaron asked about sacrificing and serving the Lord.
- The overseers were told to get back to work. Their appeal fell on deaf ears!

***The Israelite overseers realized they were in trouble when they were told, “You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.” When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, “May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”***

- After realizing that their words only caused them more trouble, the Israelite overseers met Moses and Aaron who were waiting to hear how the meeting with Pharaoh went.
  - The Hebrew word translated as trouble, *ra’*, refers to evil, calamity, hardship, and suffering.
- The Israelite overseers called a curse down on Moses and Aaron, because their actions caused Pharaoh to increase the work so much that it was threatening to kill the people.
  - The phrase, “You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh” is the translation of Hebrew idiom, which translates as “You have made our fragrance stink.” It assigns blame to Moses and Aaron for the harsh conditions the people were now in.
- It is clear from their words, that the people believed that YHWH couldn't possibly be behind the trouble that they were experiencing. The New American Commentary explains their thinking, which is sometimes our thinking, “The presumption that a good God never lets dangerous or harmful events happen to his people, false as it has always been, is a very old belief.”