

Who is the LORD That I Should Obey His Voice?
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The subject we're gonna look at today is one that had tended to hand...we tend to handle it very academically and analytically. And it's one of those where we do get out the notes and treat it like a classroom subject. And today I don't wanna do that, and it's gonna be a challenge not to do that. What I wanna do is take the subject, which is so often so analytical and so academic, and I wanna make it today very profoundly personal for you; because this subject is perhaps the most personal of all subjects in our dealing with God. And it ought not be treated academically.

"Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?" Exodus 5:2. The speaker is Pharaoh, considered to be a god in Egypt, both king and priest. People saw him on the throne as god incarnate, one of the many gods they worshipped. And they also approached him not only as god over them, incarnate, but also the god who they could approach as a priest who could then engage them and lead them in their dealings with all the other gods—Pharaoh, a king in Egypt. He's just been given a command. Two Israelites stand in front of him claiming to speak for a God named "Yahweh", the God of the Israelites. And they give a command to Pharaoh, a god in Egypt, king and priest. And they say to him, *"The Lord God of Israel says, 'Let My people go.'"*

Over four hundred years before that, the people of Israel had entered into the land of Egypt as a refugee clan, a small family clan that had been caught up in a famine and came to Egypt looking for food. And they had found a privileged place there, a place where they could settle down roots. And for four hundred years they had grown and prospered into a multitude of people living there, a great people within the land of Egypt—so great and numerous that the Egyptians began to be intimidated by them, fearful of them that, 'Man, there are so many of these Israelites. They could take us over if they wanted.' And so by force of arms the Egyptians, under the Pharaoh, turned the Israelites into slaves...forced labor; over six hundred thousand added to the work force of Egypt under the crack of a whip. And Pharaoh looked at these people as his people. And so when the command was given to him by these two Israelites, members of the slave people—speaking for the God of Israel, saying *"Let My people go,"* his response was simply, 'Who's the LORD that I should obey His voice? Who is the LORD?'

You notice in your English translations that the term 'LORD' is put in all capital letters. That means we're not dealing with the typical Hebrew word for 'Lord'; we're dealing with the name of God that, if you looked at it in the actual Hebrew text, would be made up of four consonants. You wouldn't have the vowels placed there because originally Hebrew wasn't written with vowels. We'd have four consonants. We're not sure of the exact pronunciation because we don't have the vowels, but we understand it was probably closest in interpretation or vocalization of it was the name "Yahweh." It was a form of the Hebrew verb for 'being', and it meant, literally, 'I am'; so that when God identified Himself by this name He was saying, "I AM the I Am"; 'I am the One who is. I am the One who exists, the One who was, who shall be, and who forever will be. I am the Existent One.' Our translators, when they come across that term, will simply put, "the LORD" in all capital letters.

Pharaoh says, "Who is the LORD, the 'I AM', that I should obey His voice?" It's a right question. It's the right question. You see, Egypt worshipped over two thousand gods with two thousand different names. It's hard to get an exact count, historians tell us, because there were so many different provinces and areas of Egypt that one god might be the same god over here that is over there, but they use different names. But Egypt was a land full of gods, and they had all sorts of symbols and emblems of these gods. Almost everything in their land could be used to be a symbol of one of those gods—frogs, toads, cows, pigeons, lions, the sun, the stars. There was a god for beer. There was a god for water. There was a god for cattle. Two thousand different gods all competing for man's attention and response; and Pharaoh says, 'Who is this god, Yahweh, among all the gods?'

Right question, wrong attitude. His very next statement is, 'I don't know Him, and besides, I am not gonna let Israel go.' And what happens thereafter is that God, Yahweh, the LORD, begins to walk through a series of event in dramatic fashion to demonstrate to this one, this pharaoh, this god in Egypt, king and priest among the two thousand gods of Egypt...Yahweh shows him who He is that He should be obeyed.

He takes the land of Egypt through a series of plagues. This is such a unique event in human history. There's never been one like it. The scriptures look back to it and say that that was amazing. This is the story you told to your children's children, and they told it to their children's children, and you passed it on; and you had special times when you stopped and you remembered it, and you told the story again...because this is a story unlike any other story. Yahweh, the God of Israel, takes on Egypt.

He starts by turning the river Nile into blood—not just red, but turning it into blood! And then He...the next one is He begins to bring out frogs...everywhere in Egypt there's frogs hopping around. You cannot step without stepping on a frog. And then He brings in clouds of gnats, mosquitoes, and they're all over the place; and they're biting you, and you can't get away from 'em! Every time you breathe you're sucking in mosquitoes! And it goes on like this. And each time He comes back with a challenge to the pharaoh—"Let My people go!" And the pharaoh says, "No."

Eventually he begins to bargain. He says, 'Well, maybe.' And they go plague after plague after plague, until finally they hit the tenth and final one—and God takes the firstborn of every family and household in Egypt. And one dark night every household, every family lost someone—the firstborn of the family. And finally Pharaoh, a god in Egypt, both king and priest, calls out to these two Israelites and he says, 'Get out of here!'

You look through the list of plagues and you kinda say, 'That's a bit strange.' This combination...why frogs? That's the one that really gets me. I mean, I can understand locusts. That's a pretty biblical pattern...hoards of locusts coming in and stripping the green off every plant, and just causing devastation on the crops. I can make sense out of that. But frogs? And why the range from little gnats to total darkness? What's the pattern here? Why these choices? The answer comes later in the account, where God's explaining what He's doing in this series of plagues. And He puts it this way. *"Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the I Am" 'I am the One Who Is.'* Every one of these plagues represent a judgment upon one of the two thousand gods in Egypt. The god who is represented by a frog...not a very noble god, I would think...was shown to be no god at all. The sun, blackened in the night, was shown to be no god at all in the presence of Yahweh, the One Who Is. The god of the weather, who controlled the heavens in terms of rain and snow and hail, was shown to be no god at all in the presence of Yahweh, the God Who Is and sent hail upon the land. The god named Pharaoh, firstborn, learned he was no god at all in the presence of Yahweh, the One Who Is, and took his firstborn. It was an act of judgment.

The point being made, as God makes clear as the story unfolds, the chapters go forward, in chapter 9...one of the themes He makes clear that's happening in this series of judgments upon the Egyptians that eventually bring them to release the Israelite people...He says it's "...so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth." *"There is no one like Me,"* God says. And on top of that, "...that you may know that the earth is the LORD's." 'This is My place, not yours.'

He goes on. The Israelite people...come to chapter 15, and Joel quoted from that song as he introduced it earlier. It's the first song we have, the first time God's people gather around and sing a hymn to their God. Now, it was a rousing hymn! I mean, they had tambourines, and they were dancing and everything else, and it was a mighty song. It was after Pharaoh, chasing Israel, is swallowed up in the river...I mean, in the Red Sea...and Pharaoh's army is washed away. And the people of Israel—now free from Egypt, standing on the other shore, watching the great army of Pharaoh destroyed—break out in song. And they began to sing. And the opening line of the song, the theme of the whole song, is

"I will sing to the LORD,"

'I will sing to Yahweh,'

...for He is highly exalted."

'He is above 'em all! There's no one higher than Him!'

The pivot point of this song as it unfolds, and they recount the story of God's deliverance...he comes down and there's a pivot point in the song where, in verse 11, he says...the songwriter says,

"Who is like You among the gods, O LORD?"

It's a rhetorical question. The answer in everybody's understanding, everybody's mind in Israel, is there is no one like Him. "Who is like You?" the repetition comes. 'Who is there that is like You, who's majestic in holiness, awesome in praises? Who's praises can match what we say about You? Who works wonders like we've seen You

work in the land of Egypt? Who is like You?’ Response—there is no one. There is no one in such majestic holiness. Exalted, set apart—that is the idea of majestic, exalted. Holiness means set apart, totally unique, no one like Him. That’s who Yahweh is that we should obey Him.

Theologians would take everything we’ve talked about and summarize it in one theological term. They would say what we’re talking about is God’s sovereignty, the fact that the LORD is all-powerful in authority over all heaven and earth. There is no one above Him. His, another way to put it, absolute in His supremacy—an absolute supremacy that determines in the end what will be...no one else. He is the One who finally determines what will be. That doctrine, that reality—of God’s sovereignty demonstrated so dramatically in Egypt—is a doctrine of great assurance. To know that God, the Exalted One, the One who is majestic in His holiness, the One of absolute supremacy, is in control is a doctrine of great assurance. It’s a reality we can ground our lives on.

We look at the story of God’s working in scripture and we trace it, and we’re astounded by it; how it begins with a good creation, a wondrous, glorious creation, when God looked at the earth and said it is good, it is very good. But then we saw in the early pages of that story that it goes bad. Man rebels; man resists. And instead of a good creation, we now have a rebellious creation. We have a world that says, ‘We do not recognize You as sovereign. We will not bend our knee to You, Lord God. Who are You that we should obey You?’

An amazing, astounding, glorious and mysterious...that sovereign God responds with a promise to this rebellious world. He picks a wanderer who is worshipping pagan idols, and He calls to this man, Abraham, by name. And He calls to him, and He makes him this promise. Among other things, the final great part of the promise is this. He says, ‘In you, Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed. All the families of the earth have turned their back on Me. All the families of the earth have rejected Me. All of the families of the earth resist my sovereignty. But guess what? I am going to bless all the peoples, and I’m going to do it through you, Abraham; through your descendants.’

And the story begins to unfold, of how the first step is God takes this man, this man, and he builds from this man not just a family, not just a clan, not just a tribe, but a great nation—a nation of God’s presence, unique among all the nations of the world, a nation among whom God dwelt. He met them at Mount Sinai, and He said ‘Here are the conditions.’ And in thunder and lightning and power and darkness God said, ‘I will be your God. Here are the conditions.’ They responded and they said, ‘We accept those conditions. We will be Your people.’ And the first, only, pure theocracy came into being—a nation of God’s presence. And the next step in the story is they move from Mount Sinai and they go to a land of God’s presence, a place flowing with milk and honey, where God says, ‘I will be there, and I will be with you, and I will be among you in that place.’

And from there the story keeps moving. But the confusing part as we trace that story is it doesn’t trace that neatly. For example, after the promise they become a slave people, not a great nation. Before they stand at Mount Sinai praising the God of the universe as their king, they stand and they bow under the whip of Pharaoh. And we wonder who is in control. And then once they’re at Mount Sinai, and they move on, instead of marching into the Promised Land we find that they wander in the wilderness for forty years! And we wonder what is going on. This story seems out of control. And once they’re in the land we find that, blessed with God’s presence, blessed with a place where God dwelt, they squander it all. And the story doesn’t read neat; it reads like our stories—full of twists and turns, and ups and downs.

And that’s why it’s so reassuring to know, in the middle of that, that the One who has said He will bless all the nations through Abraham is not just one among the gods. He is the sovereign LORD of all, and He will determine the end. And all the nations, all the peoples, will be blessed through the descendant of Abraham named Jesus. That’s the doctrine, and it is powerful and reassuring. But we have to hear it as personal. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty always, always, always must be heard personal. It was personal for Pharaoh. He says, ‘I do not know this one named Yahweh. And besides,’ he says, ‘I will not let Israel go. I will not do what He says to do.’ That is as personal as it gets. ‘I will not do what He says to do.’

And God responds on a personal level. God says to Moses and the people of Israel, ‘Stand back and see what I’m gonna do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he will let them go. And under compulsion he will drive them out of this land.’ That is God being as personal as it gets. Pharaoh says, ‘I will not.’ God says, ‘You will.’ And he does. Pharaoh finally comes in the end, and he says to the people of Israel, ‘Get out! Go!’ And he even pleads for them, ‘Bless me when you talk to this God named Yahweh’

Listen, sovereignty will always come to you that personal. It will be God calling you to obedience; not the person next to you, not the person beside you, not the person around you, but you...to obedience. It may be an ethical

decision. It may be a moral situation that you're in. It may be in a relationship. It may be in the handling of a financial circumstance. It may be in making decisions about a direction. It will be...it will be for all of us the command, not just the invitation but the command, to honor Jesus as LORD of all, the command to bow our knee and say of Jesus, 'He is Lord.' Yahweh, the God Who Is, has commanded that we do that.

That is personal. And the right question to ask at that point is the question Pharaoh asked—"Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?" Don't focus on the question of "What'll happen if I do? What pain might I experience? What pleasure might I enjoy?" Don't ask "Is there a better way to do this? Is there a wiser way to do this?" Don't ask if "Maybe I should consult with somebody else and there's another approach to this." The question to ask in the face of God's command is a personal question—who is He that you should obey Him? That's the question you wrestle with.

But I have to urge you...ask that question in the right way. Pharaoh asked that question with arrogant disregard. Without even fully knowing who Yahweh was, he'd already decided 'I won't obey.' That's arrogant disregard. Wrestle with the question with integrity, with diligence, and with humility. In the heat and the press of the situation, and you know the call to obedience, start with asking, "Who is He that I should obey Him?" I can't urge you strong enough. You may never be able to revisit that decision again.

Interesting thing happened with Pharaoh. It's almost confusing how it unfolds. After Pharaoh said 'no' and said, 'I will not let my people go,' and the Israelites are wondering...it's gotten worse instead of better, and they're struggling with, well, what's going to happen, and God makes this statement to Moses, the leader of the Israelites. He says, 'Listen, I'm going to harden Pharaoh's heart. I'm going to solidify it in its rebellion. I'm going to lock it in like concrete set in the heat of the day that will never, ever be pliable again. I'm going to set his heart hard, and I'm going to do it so I may multiply the signs and wonders that I'm going to do. Every time I do something that a normal person would respond and say "Oh, You are God! I will repent", this man will keep on going. And he's going to go right through the frogs; he's going to go right through the gnats; he's going to go right through the hail; he's going to go right through the plague on the cattle; he's going to go right through the flies; he is gonna go right through the darkness of the night and the day; and he is gonna go actually, ultimately, right through the death of his own son and still not acknowledge Me. And by time I am done with him people will have seen My power in an unprecedented scale.' It's astounding to me. After his son dies, and every household in all of Egypt is screaming and wailing, and his officials come to him and say, 'Get rid of these Israelites—they're destroying us!' Pharaoh lets 'em go; but then he does something. He chases 'em once again, and he chases 'em with his army right into that ocean!

You say, 'How could he do that? It's beyond reason!' Yes, it is. The explanation God gives is He hardened the heart of Israel...of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, so that he chased after the sons of Israel. God took His people out into the wilderness and He told 'em, 'Wander around a bit. Pharaoh is gonna think that you're lost and you're confused. And he's gonna chase after you. And I'm gonna destroy him.' He hardened his heart. People wrestle with that. 'Is that fair?' I mean, centuries later King Nebuchadnezzar—just as proud, just as arrogant—God will touch his life and bring repentance to his heart. Is this fair?

The Apostle Paul, dealing with this particular instance and pointing it out as a supreme example of God's sovereignty in Romans chapter 9, makes this statement. He says

Then He (speaking of God) has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

When Pharaoh said 'No' God could have extended mercy, given him another opportunity, or He could have done what He did—He hardened his heart. That was God's choice, and He made it. People respond, 'Well, how can God still find fault with Pharaoh then?' And the response comes back Paul. He says

Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?

'Who are you to sit over God and say, "You can't do that to Pharaoh"?'

Move on further and Paul says, 'Listen...'

Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

God has potter's rights, and He can do what He wants with whom He desires at any time, any place, and we cannot find fault. He is the potter. That is sovereignty.

Let's make it personal. Some of you are wrestling with very clear commands from God in your life right now. Not all of you, but some of you. And God has made it very clear what He wants you to do. It may be in your business; it may be in a relationship; it may be with your career; it may be fundamentally, most important of all, what are you gonna do about Jesus. God's put a command in front of you. The choice is obey or disobey. But I want you to understand is if you say 'no' to God at this point, when His sovereignty is in front of you, do not assume that you will ever, ever, ever say 'yes' to Him in the future. If you choose disobedience at this point, do not...do not for one instance harbor the thought that somewhere in the future you'll be able to choose obedience. You cannot choose the condition of your heart for the future. You do not have that sort of sovereignty.

Sovereignty...sovereignty is God saying to you right now, "Obey Me." That is sovereignty, and you either respond to it or you don't. And He will sort out your future.

Let's stand.

We live in a world full of pharaohs and we're called, like those Israelites who stood in his presence, to give witness to His reality.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that grace and in that truth. Amen.