

## ***God Declares War***

Exodus 5:1-6:8

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Exodus

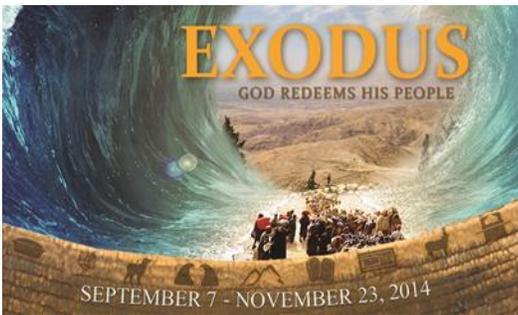
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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**TEXT:** Exodus 5:1-6:8

We continue this morning in our series on Exodus. Exodus is the Gospel of the Old Testament, the good news of God's saving actions. It's the center of gravity, the template of redemption.



These events redefine the entire calendar for God's people; they define our identity and response as a people claimed by God. I love the Exodus, and I pray your love for these events, and the God of these events, deepens as well. This morning, we turn our attention to a declaration of war. God is a warrior. In Exodus 15, we see the great song that is sung at the conclusion of this

redemption. In Exodus 15:1-3, Moses and the Israelites sing this song to the Lord:

*"I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him. The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His name."*

At the beginning stages of this final battle, in Exodus 14:14, the Lord says to stand and see the salvation that God will work for you:

*"The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."*

The image of God as a conquering, saving, powerful warrior is a vital aspect of the testimony of Scripture. It is a very strong image of God, and it's an image that we need to have if we are to know the God of the Scriptures. It is the same image that goes through the prophets, as in Isaiah 63; or even to the end of the Bible in Revelation 19:11, when we see the Lord Jesus ride out conquering:

*"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war."*

The God of the Bible makes war on our behalf and rescues us from our enemies.

In our text, we see God's declaration of war before the most powerful human figure on the

planet at this time. As we look at this text and follow this declaration of war, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible's vision of freedom. We often say that war is just if it is for the purpose of freedom, and the freedom envisioned in Exodus 5 and 6 is the freedom to ultimately worship God. In Exodus 5:1, Moses and Aaron are sent to Pharaoh. They come with this ultimatum:

*“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 desert.’”*

It is not that they just desire to go out for a party in the wilderness, a long weekend away from the drudgery of slavery. The image here is an image of being released from an un-ending, 365 days a year slavery for the freedom of worship. The festival here in Exodus is to be a festival of worship. The word that is used is the word for the three great pilgrimage festivals that are used in the rest of the Old Testament. “Let My people go so they may hold a festival of worship, that they may worship Me in the wilderness.” This is the original summons and instruction to Moses when Moses said to God: “How I know that you are with me?” The Lord said in Exodus 3:12:

*“When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”*

The refrain of Exodus is: “Let My people go so that they may worship Me.” This is so important. Exodus 4:21 says this in a different way:

*“Let My son go, so he may worship Me.”*

Exodus 7:16 says:

*“Let My people go, so that they may worship Me in the desert.”*

Exodus 8:1 says:

*“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let My people go, so that they may worship Me.’”*

This is the refrain of the Exodus. Freedom in the Scriptures is not an abstract idea. It is not a virtue just floating up as the desired end for mankind. Freedom in the Bible is the freedom to worship God. The Bible's vision of freedom is not of autonomous humanity making independent choices. The Bible's vision of people doing what's right in their own eyes is the ultimate degree of tyranny. In the Bible, freedom is found in following the Lord. I am an American, and I'm proud to be an American, and freedom is a value we hold dearly in our society. I remember this being impressed upon me as a young man. When I was a university student, I used to come home and my best friend and I created an entrepreneurial business opportunity of valet parking at a very expensive restaurant. The restaurant really had no need of valet parking as the whole parking lot had spaces that were within 50 feet of the entrance. There really wasn't a need, but my best friend came up with the idea that we would take the first car that came in and jam it into the entrance, artificially creating a backup on the street. Then, we would come as agents of rescue to park these cars that really didn't need to be

parked. Since this was a very expensive restaurant, people were pleased to be rescued, and then pleased to give generously to these young men who brought them their cars. There was one man, an older man who drove a really nice car and had relocated to the area from New Hampshire. I always remembered his car because the license plate of New Hampshire says on the bottom: *Live Free or Die*. He would look at us young guys and try to impress his values on the next generation. He would tell us: "Live free or die." I remember thinking: "That sounds good. I mean, freedom is good." I was a brand-new Christian at the time, and I didn't realize that the response I should have made to him was: "That's a great license plate, but what really should be on the license plates of our hearts is: "Worship God or die." I must worship God or I will be enslaved to anything or anyone.

The Bible's vision of freedom is an exhilarating vision of being set free from whatever or whoever would enslave us, and that slavery is really holding people back from a life of worship and praise to God. That is what we were made for. We were made in the image of God to declare His excellency, and whatever keeps you from doing that is enslaving you. We see this in bold relief in Exodus, and God comes with this summons, a declaration of war: "Let My people go, so that they might worship Me." Pharaoh does not respond well to this. Last week we saw that the pharaohs of Exodus are the opening kings of either the 19th or 18th Dynasty. It is interesting that the Scripture fits this time period well because the title *Pharaoh* has just come into vogue as a title for the king of Egypt. In Exodus, you see that he is sometimes called the king of Egypt, and sometimes is called Pharaoh. *Pharaoh* in Egyptian means *the great house*. University of Michigan fans love to go to *The Big House*. Pharaoh is not just called the **ruler** of the house, he **is** the house. He is the dwelling place. He was perceived as God incarnate, responsible for maintaining cosmic order. Pharaoh saw himself at the top of the chain, and so he asked with no small degree of irony in Exodus 5:2:

*"Who is the LORD, that I should obey Him and let Israel go?"*

"You're in the wrong area. I'm the one who gives commands in this sphere." Pharaoh does not know Yahweh, the living God. He will not obey Him. This is true for all of us. When we are ignorant of God's person and character, we don't worship Him. There are millions of people in the United States, hundreds of thousands of people in greater Cincinnati, who will not worship God this morning. They will live their lives; they will breathe the air specifically designed by God as the Creator to preserve their lives; they will eat food that they did not grow; they will enjoy the company of other people made in the image and likeness of God, and will never once pause to express gratitude, thanks, and worship. They will not do that because they do not know the Lord, who He is. When you know the Lord, worship flows out naturally, spontaneously from the heart. To know God leads us to worship, as this text will take us. Pharaoh does not know Him and refuses to let Israel go for the sake of worship. Moses and Aaron threaten Pharaoh, the

most powerful man in the world of that time. They say in Exodus 5:3:

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

A threatening and ominous line, for indeed, plagues and swords are coming for Pharaoh's stubborn refusal. Remember, in Exodus 1, that this was Pharaoh's great concern at the beginning: “These people may become too numerous, and if the war breaks out, they might go and join the other side in fight against us.” Well, a war has just broken out, and the war is against the king of Egypt. He refuses to let Israel go and denies the freedom to worship.

What is so powerful about the way this narrative unfolds in Hebrew is that the word for *labor* or *work* is the same as the word for *worship*. This word hangs back and forth throughout the narrative. Pharaoh says in Exodus 5:4:

*“Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!”*

And they plead: “Let us go and worship.” The question is: Whom will you worship? What is the meaning of their lives? Pharaoh says: “This is your work; this is your worship, to work unceasingly for me.” Some of us don't report in on Monday morning to people wearing a nemes headdress and the uraeus crown on your head, but in some of our companies, our bosses function in this way, not exactly, but the parallels are closer than sometimes we wish, aren't they? This is your work; this is the meaning of your existence; grind yourself into nothing; work weekends for the sake of the company; never take a day off for worship.” Our society knows increasingly fewer limits on the demands on children or adults. There is no time for worship; work harder. Pharaoh denies the freedom, and then he increases the burden. In Exodus 5:7-8, Pharaoh says:

*“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.”*

Not only does he deny freedom, but he increases the work load. “Thanks for asking for a day off. Instead, why don't you work weekends and the additional shifts in the evening for the rest of the year,” is basically his response. The people are not commanded to make bricks without straw, but they are now to gather the straw, as well. Straw is a vital ingredient in brick making in the ancient world. The straw decomposes, and the matter from the straw helps the brick hold together and increases its strength by 400%. Images of people working without relief are found in ancient Egypt. This is an image from the time of Thutmose III, who could be the Pharaoh of the time of the Exodus. We see foreigners working making bricks; a typical

quota of 3000 a day; monotonous work day by day. This scene is actually a small piece of a



much larger mural, and another section of the mural shows the taskmaster with a rod. It says in hieroglyphs: "This rod is in my hand; do not be idle." Crushing the people; the quota must be met. We even have logs from foreman of labor gangs from the time of Ramses II

recording that most people did not meet their quota of bricks. They did not meet the quota and the work was increased. Everyone who sets himself in opposition to God and the freedom to worship Him will eventually degrade the image of God. If you don't worship God, you will degrade the image of God made to worship Him. So Pharaoh takes that last step. The foremen appointed by Pharaoh's slave drivers are eventually physically beaten, as we read in Exodus 5:14:

*"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?'"*

This is always a final step, to take the image of God and degrade it with violence. Blows are struck; the image defaced. The foremen come and meet with Moses and Aaron, and they are in despair. The promise of deliverance has brought only physical beating. They meet Moses and Aaron and say in Exodus 5:21:

*"May the LORD 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."*

In the narrative, tension rises dramatically. The promise of deliverance has brought initial despair. Moses and Aaron have a fresh appreciation of the difficulty of their mission, of the steep inclined plane of resistance. This will be harder than they thought.

I have a friend who became president of Biola University just a few years ago, and he summarized his change of role in this way: "The first year, you have to run as hard as you possibly can." Then he said: "In the second year, that's when you really kick it into gear." He's doing a fabulous job with Biola University. This initial task for Moses and Aaron, though, reveals that this mode of deliverance will be much greater than they had yet realized. It's a moment of discouragement. What do we do when we are discouraged? Moses sets the example. He turns toward the Lord. We need to turn toward the Lord when the task is greater than we initially thought. One of the great outcomes of the task's being greater than you think is that God will reveal His glory and power to a greater degree than you thought was necessary. Moses turns to

the Lord in Exodus 5:22 and says:

*“O Lord, why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me?”*

The Lord responds to Moses with a sequel to the burning bush. He meets with him again, reveals His character, might, and intention, and encourages him that it is the Lord's power and strength that will accomplish what is humanly impossible. In Exodus 6:1, the Lord says to Moses:

*“Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of My mighty hand he will let them go; because of My mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.”*

In this moment of despair, in this low trough, this is what God would do. Moses' heart must have been thrilled with this image of the Lord's reaching out a mighty hand, a strong arm. The image of an outstretched arm to gain great victory was plastered all over the walls and monuments of ancient Egypt. Some of the temples that the Israelites were enslaved to make and produce were filled with larger-than-life images of the Pharaoh with a huge arm. The



temple of Karnak shows Thutmose III reaching with his huge outstretched arm. Remember, he's grabbing the heads of his enemies and ready to crush them. The image (below) of Ramses is a warrior with his arm drawn behind the concrete bow. The hieroglyphs above the figure of the king say: “This is the one who has an

outstretched and powerful arm.” The Israelites had to construct military garrison cities for the sake of the king of Egypt, and now God says to them, and to us this morning: “I will reach out My mighty arm to save.” God's conquering arm is broader than Pharaoh's; it is stronger. The image of God's mighty outstretched arm makes a permanent impression on God's people in Scripture. It is one of the most recurring statements of God's power to save. Look at these verses:



Exodus 3:19:

*“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him.”*

Exodus 13:3:

*“Then Moses said to the people, ‘Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand.’”*

Exodus 13:9:

*“For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with His mighty hand.”*

Later, in Exodus 13:14, Moses speaks into the distant future:

*“In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’”*

When the children in the next generation say: “What is the meaning of these commandments? Why do we act the way we do? Why do we celebrate what we celebrate?” the answer in Deuteronomy 6:21 is to tell your children:

*“We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.”*

When we sing that God is mighty to save, this is the God we worship. Can you hold worship in if this world is crushing you to dust and snuffing out the reason of your being, and God reaches out from heaven and takes hold of you, and lifts you out of the pit and places you on solid ground, and frees you from oppression and says: “You can worship Me and live for Me”? Can you hold that in? Can you say: “I have something else to do”? Is there something else in the front of your mind? There can't be! Can you stay long in those troughs of despair, when the problem seems too big or the answer seems to slow in coming, or the one who holds all the power seems to be working actively against you? Can you really stay too long in that trough if you know that the God that you believe in is the God who possesses a mighty arm and outstretched hand? He will lift us up, the Scripture says.

God encourages Moses and says in Exodus 6:2-3:

*“I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by My name the LORD [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them.”*

In other words, “The patriarchs knew Me; they experienced My power; they knew the name Yahweh.” We read in Genesis that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob called on the name of the Lord, on Yahweh, built altars to Him, and worship Him, but they did not experience what this generation in Scripture is about to experience. They were sojourners in a land not their own; they died with promises; and those promises are about to be fulfilled. “I am Yahweh,” the Lord says repeatedly in this passage. He says: “I made My covenant with them, to give them the land. I've heard the groanings, and I've remembered My promise, and the time of fulfillment is at hand.”

In a theocentric flourish, the Lord tells Moses in Exodus 6:6-8 to tell the Israelites seven things He is about to do. He says:

*"I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.*

*I will free you from being slaves to them, and*

*I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.*

*I will take you as my own people, and*

*I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.*

*And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.*

*I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD."*

God promises to save us in these words: "I will bring you out from that place of slavery and bondage, and I will set you free to worship Me." Perhaps my favorite image, and thus why the whole series is called *God Redeems His People*, is the image of redemption. The word used here in Scripture is the role of a kinsman redeemer. A kinsman redeemer has an obligation. If members of his family are enslaved, or carried off into exile, or kidnapped, or in some way defamed, disgraced, or enslaved, the kinsman redeemer has to act on their behalf. God says: "I will act on your behalf in this way. I will reach out My outstretched arm, My mighty hand."

The God of the Bible is a warrior, mighty to save. He declares an open war against Pharaoh in this way. He promises great saving actions, but then He says that His actions lead to a covenant bond forever. In Exodus 6 and 7, God says for the first time in Scripture what will become a dominating refrain throughout the Bible. God says: "I will take you as My very own people, and I will be your God." This covenant formula is like a wedding vow. I love that moment in the wedding ceremony when I tell the couple that for your first promises, face the front. You promise to God first. But then everyone is excited for that turn towards each other and a promise one to another: "I take you." The covenant language God uses in Exodus 6:7 is like a wedding vow: "I will take you as My very own people, and I will be to you as God, as husband. I will care for you and provide for you." This is God's solemn promise on oath. Redemption leads to covenant. God says: "Then you will know that I am the Lord your God." Here is the answer to Pharaoh's question: "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?" This is answered in Exodus 6:7: "Then you will know that I am the Lord." How do we know who God is? We know God by His saving actions on our behalf. To know God's saving actions is to be set free to worship Him and serve Him, to not be enslaved to anyone or anything, but to be free to have a past, a present and a future. God says: "I will not only be your God and you will know Me, but I will fulfill My promise. I will bring you to the place that I swore to give. I am the Lord." Remember, ultimately the place is a place for worship. It's not just land for the sake of land. It is a place to come to for

worship. I'm so thankful that we have a place to worship God, to speak openly about Him. In our world today, this is not to be taken for granted. It is a great gift to be redeemed, to be brought into covenant, and given the freedom to worship God.

I don't know where everyone is this morning. I know we have different things we're facing, but I want to apply this for us. I want to remind you that **freedom is found in worship**. Praising God is the activity of freed people: to worship Him; to have the bonds of slavery broken; and to be brought into the freedom of worship; to live a life of praise. If you're not worshipping God this morning, the Bible sees you as enslaved. The Bible sees you in chains, held back. The **ignorance of God precludes our worship and will always degrade us into slavery**. I want to challenge you, if you are in chains this morning, to look to God with His outstretched arm. Some of us have volunteered for slavery; some of us are working too much; some of us are working our children too much. We have volunteered for slavery that keeps our hearts back from worship. **Never underestimate the cost of your redemption or the ease of ministry**. This is a powerful lesson of the great cost and effort involved in this declaration of war. Lastly, we are called to be a people who **celebrate the character and actions of God who is mighty to save**. The best thing to do after hearing God's Word would be to stand up and just worship the Lord. Worshipping God is a declaration of freedom. One of the verses of the praise song *All I Have is Christ* expresses it so well:

“Now, Lord, I would be Yours alone  
And live so all might see  
The strength to follow Your commands  
Could never come from me  
Oh Father, use my ransomed life  
In any way You choose  
And let my song forever be  
My only boast is You.”

Let's worship as free people, people whose lives have been ransomed. Let's worship God with desperation, with gratitude that we are saved, that we have been grabbed with an outstretched and mighty arm. Let's worship Him now in faith even if you're in one of those low troughs where you need His hand to pull you up.

Father, we would come to You. We thank You that You declared war on our behalf and that You have set us free to worship You and live for You. Lord, You are worthy to receive our unending praise, and so we give You our joyful praise this morning. Fill our hearts with praise.

In Jesus' name, Amen.