

Exodus 5:1-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-5/exodus-51-5/>

Verses 1 – 5 contain the account of Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh. Moses begins by demanding that Pharaoh allow the Israelites to go into the wilderness to worship the LORD. Pharaoh flatly denies their request. Moses and the others try to convince Pharaoh that it is a matter of life-and-death. Pharaoh then concludes that this is just an excuse to avoid their labor.

After meeting with the leaders of Israel, Moses and Aaron were allowed a meeting with Pharaoh. In his presence, they said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.’” They identified that the message they were bringing was from their LORD, not themselves. The message began “Let my people go.” The Hebrew term for “let go” is in such a form that it can be translated “send away,” “dismiss,” or “release.” All of these carry the sense that the one(s) “sent away” are no longer under the authority of the sovereign who did the dismissal. In other words, the LORD (through Moses) is telling Pharaoh to release His people with no expectation that they will return. So Moses is really asking Pharaoh to release the Israelites permanently from slavery.

The word “feast” signified a religious celebration. Egyptian law dictated that, while in Egypt, the Israelites legally could worship only the gods and goddesses of Egypt. To worship any other God, they would have to leave Egypt and go to the “wilderness” (i.e., beyond the Egyptian border), and this is what Moses is saying to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh’s response was in the form of a question – *Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go.* It is really a rhetorical question because Pharaoh was considered divine, worthy of worship and submission. So naturally, he would not recognize any authority greater than he because it would be a threat to his absolute sovereignty over Egypt. So, in Pharaoh’s mind at least, why should I *obey His voice to let Israel go?* The statement *I do not know the Lord* probably means that Pharaoh does not recognize the authority of the LORD and *will not let Israel go.*

Moses and Aaron, in response to this blatant denial of their request, responded by saying, *The God of the Hebrews has met with us.* In an attempt to be more diplomatic and less confrontational, they restated their request to

Pharaoh to *Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.* The significance of the three days could be that it is how long it would take the Israelites to leave Egyptian territory. This is another indication that what Moses and Aaron were asking was the permanent release of the Israelites. Then, in order to give the request a sense of urgency, they added *otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.* This was not part of the LORD's message in 3:18. Perhaps Moses added this to inform Pharaoh that, like the gods of Egypt, the God of Israel would be angry on account of their disobedience and as a result, there would be punishment. Perhaps this was one of the lessons Moses learned from the seemingly strange incident in chapter 4 when the LORD apparently threatened to kill him for not circumcising his sons ([Exodus 4:24](#)). In this case, the punishment would be towards the Israelites. Either way, Pharaoh would lose a large contingent of his workforce.

Pharaoh had two responses to Moses' second attempt to persuade him. In the first response, *the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work?"* Obviously, Pharaoh became convinced that Moses was trying to excuse the Israelites from their hard labor, so his command was *Get back to your labors!*" The second response explains the first – *Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!"* Such a cessation by a large workforce would not only undermine the Egyptian economy, it would also call into question Pharaoh's ability to rule effectively.

Biblical Text:

And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" ² But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go." ³ Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." ⁴ But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get *back* to your labors!" ⁵ Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!"