

Message 7: Faithful to the Covenant

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Exodus Series

Message 7

Exodus 4:18–31 (CSB)

¹⁸Then Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, "Please let me return to my relatives in Egypt and see if they are still living."

Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

¹⁹Now in Midian the LORD told Moses, "Return to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead." ²⁰So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took God's staff in his hand.

²¹The LORD instructed Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, make sure you do before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put within your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he won't let the people go. ²²And you will say to Pharaoh: This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³I told you: Let my son go so that he may worship me, but you refused to let him go. Look, I am about to kill your firstborn son!"

²⁴On the trip, at an overnight campsite, it happened that the LORD confronted him and intended to put him to death. ²⁵So Zipporah took a flint, cut off her son's foreskin, threw it at Moses's feet, and said, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶So he let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood," referring to the circumcision.

REUNION OF MOSES AND AARON

²⁷Now the LORD had said to Aaron, "Go and meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. ²⁸Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and about all the signs he had commanded him to do. ²⁹Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled

all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰Aaron repeated everything the LORD had said to Moses and performed the signs before the people. ³¹The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD had paid attention to them and that he had seen their misery, they knelt low and worshiped.

Introduction: This is a weird text.

A. One reason it is weird is because it is hard to understand what God is thinking.

1. God has practically begged and forced Moses to accept the calling.
2. God empowered Moses to perform signs and wonders using nothing more than a shepherd's staff.
3. Now, God is going to kill Moses while he heads towards Egypt.

B. Before I start digging into the details, I need to mention a couple of things when it comes to studying passages like this:

1. First, this passage has been argued and debated more than almost any other in Exodus.
 - a. Even the early Jews weren't sure how to interpret this passage.
 - b. There are some very strange and weird interpretations out there, many from people that are smarter and more educated than myself, yet I believe they miss the mark.
 - c. What I am going to bring out today is what I believe makes sense in light of all of Scripture.
2. Second, Exodus as a whole doesn't include every detail for every story.
 - a. And when it does, sometimes the details just don't add up or make complete sense to us.
 - b. But, they did to the original audience and sometimes we will have to be ok with not knowing all of the pieces.

c. When Scripture presents us with ambiguity, we are better off not to make stuff up.

d. Today's passage leaves a lot of details out.

e. We will discuss these issues but probably won't come to any solid conclusions because the text doesn't either.

C. When we are done today, what I want you to hear is this:

1. God takes His promises seriously.

2. God also takes our obedience seriously.

3. Covenants are serious issues that must not be neglected.

1. Moses leaves Midian on a Mission from God.

A. 40 years have passed since Moses had left Egypt.

1. The people who wanted him dead are dead:

a. The old Pharaoh is dead.

b. The daughter of Pharaoh who had raised Moses was probably dead and it is likely that Moses' parents had passed away by this time but we aren't sure.

c. Moses wasn't sure what he was coming back to, except that Aaron was still living at the age of 83.

2. A lot had changed for Moses since he had left Egypt.

a. He was married and had two sons.

b. Today's text says that Moses had brought his sons and his wife with him, although only one is named at this point.

c. Moses had found a different kind of success in Midian.

1. The prince had become a shepherd.

2. Moses was leaving Midian a different man than he had come.

B. Midian is important because this was where Moses met God.

1. It was where God revealed himself to Moses.
2. Midian was where Moses was reacquainted with his Hebrew roots.
3. Midian was the place God used to shape Moses into the man he was meant to be.
 - a. Some of us here are in a Midian place.
 - b. Although we can't wait for this season to be over, we also get the sense that God is speaking to us here and shaping and forming us.
 - c. Never forget that it is God's will for you to leave Midian better than you entered it.

C. Moses had entered Midian from a position of rebellion and left it in a position of (partial) obedience.

1. We sometimes end up in Midian because of our own sinfulness.
2. How many of us are thankful that God can turn bad decisions into good results!
3. It would seem that Moses is on the right path!
 - a. He is getting ready to bring hope to God's people and torment to God's enemies.
 - b. Moses is finally going to fulfill the plans and purposes for his life.
 - c. Then, as Moses is on his way to fulfill God's will, God almost kills Moses.

2. Why does God intend to kill Moses?

A. The CSB translation that I read says the Lord "confronted" Moses.

1. Other translations say that the Lord "met" Moses.

2. The Hebrew word can mean “meet, encounter, or confront”.
3. I think the word “confront” helps us better understand what is happening in the background here.
 - a. Many times in the future, God would meet Moses.
 - b. But usually, those were the good kind of meetings.
 - c. There is something terribly wrong that would cause God to want to kill Moses.
4. But what is the confrontation all about?

B. *The confrontation happens because Moses had not circumcised one or both of his sons.*

1. This doesn't sound like a big deal to us, but the first Jews reading this would have known this was a big deal.
2. Almost 400 years before, God had called a man named Abraham to be the conduit of God's blessings to the world.
 - a. Through Abraham's lineage would come priests, kings, and the Messiah.
 - b. The old man Abraham (about 75 years old) was given a covenant from God in Genesis 12.
 1. Immediately following the covenant in Genesis 12, Abraham left his homeland due to a famine.
 2. **Guess where he went? Egypt.**
 - c. After some time, Abraham left Egypt and encounters God again (does this sound kind of familiar to Moses?)
 1. In Genesis 17, God tells Abraham:
 2. Genesis 17:1-27 (CSB)

COVENANT CIRCUMCISION

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him, saying, "I am God Almighty. Live in my presence and be blameless. ²I will set up my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you greatly."

³Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: ⁴"As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. ⁵Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. ⁶I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you. ⁷I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. ⁸And to you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God."

⁹God also said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep my covenant. ¹⁰This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised. ¹¹You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²Throughout your generations, every male among you is to be circumcised at eight days old—every male born in your household or purchased from any foreigner and not your offspring. ¹³Whether born in your household or purchased, he must be circumcised. **My covenant will be marked in your flesh as a permanent covenant.** ¹⁴If any male is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai, for Sarah will be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Can Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman, give birth?" ¹⁸So Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael were acceptable to you!"

¹⁹But God said, "No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm my covenant with him as a permanent covenant for his future offspring. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you. I will certainly bless him; I will make him fruitful and will multiply him greatly. He

will father twelve tribal leaders, and I will make him into a great nation.

²¹ But I will confirm my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.” ²² When he finished talking with him, God withdrew from Abraham.

²³ So Abraham took his son Ishmael and those born in his household or purchased—every male among the members of Abraham’s household—and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very day, just as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised, ²⁵ and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. ²⁶ On that same day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷ And all the men of his household—whether born in his household or purchased from a foreigner—were circumcised with him.

3. Circumcision was for every male in a Jewish household.

4. Circumcision was a physical sign of an eternal promise.

5. Circumcision was a daily reminder of the Covenant.

6. Circumcision was a permanent reminder of the Covenant.

C. Circumcision was a not a new idea when God introduced it to Abraham back in Genesis 17.

1. Many cultures had practiced different forms of circumcision for many centuries by this time.

2. What God did was to take circumcision and give it a spiritual significance.

a. He took something that had been used for other reasons and gave it a divine purpose:

b. the sign of God’s covenant with Israel.

3. Today, there is a lot of debate over the value of circumcision:

a. In Africa, the Health organizations encourage circumcision as a way to prevent HIV although they are only guessing.

b. Much of Europe now encourages parents to wait for the male to decide if he wants to be circumcised or not.

4. Interestingly, circumcision today is practiced mostly among Americans, Jews, and Muslims.

a. Why do the Muslims practice circumcision?

b. Because Abraham circumcised Ishmael who is the Patriarch that Islam stems from, whereas Judaism and Christianity trace their lineage through Isaac.

D. Is circumcision a matter for us today?

1. The Apostle Paul recognized that circumcision of the body was for the Jew and not the Gentile.

2. So he, and the first Council at Jerusalem, didn't require physical circumcision to become a Christian.

3. The Apostle Paul, instead, stresses that true circumcision happens on the heart or in our inner world where our thoughts, will, and emotions are.

4. But for Moses and Israel, circumcision was required and expected.

Part of God's confrontation had to do with Moses rejecting circumcision. Another aspect had to deal with the message that Moses was told to deliver.

3. Moses' message to Israel and to Egypt required the covenant.

A. God gives Moses a message.

1. Tell Pharaoh to let my people go.

2. Perform signs before Pharaoh and the people so they will see God's power.

3. And, tell them, that Israel is God's firstborn son and if you don't let them go, I will kill the firstborn sons of Egypt.

4. In a few chapters, we will see God do exactly this:

- a. The Destroying angel will be unleashed and all of the firstborn sons of Egypt will die as a sign of judgment.
- b. Not only the human firstborn but every firstborn of the flocks as well will die on that day.
- c. God also declares that the firstborn male always belongs to God, as God's portion.
- d. God will soon declare that the death of the firstborns of Egypt serve as redeeming the firstborns of Israel.

5. God means business in this message.

B. God is enacting and fulfilling the promise and covenant He had made to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

1. 400 years of oppression were prophesied but so, too, was deliverance.
- 2 Slavery in Egypt must happen, but the Promised Land waits on the other side.
3. The small, insignificant family of Abraham that entered Egypt with around 70 people will walk out as millions.
4. The sign of the promise for all of this to happen was circumcision.

C. Guess what?

1. Moses' son or sons were not circumcised.
2. How could Moses deliver the message of the Covenant when he was raising his family in disobedience to the same covenant?
 - a. I believe there are a lot of parents raising kids in disobedience but are expecting blessing to result.
 - b. We wonder why our generations are becoming more depressed, more violent, more defiant, more lost, and more broken...could it be because we are raising families apart from God's covenant and still expecting God to bless us?

4. Midian experiences do not give us permission to live in disobedience.

A. Earlier in the series, I said that I believe Moses was circumcised as a baby.

1. This was one of the signs that helped Pharaoh's daughter know that this baby was a Hebrew and not Egyptian.

2. Also, even though God's people were slaves, they were still God's people.

a. They were still the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

b. They were still the carriers of the promise and covenant.

c. We also know that every male who left Egypt, and entered the wilderness, had been circumcised because this is what Joshua 5 says.

3. But, for whatever reason, Moses had not circumcised his sons.

B. Just because Moses wasn't where he had planned to be, it didn't give Moses permission to walk in disobedience.

1. Some of us believe that, because our sin has got us in this mess, that one more sin won't matter to God.

2. We use the occasion of chaos and disruption as excuse to not be obedient.

3. For example, In our day and age, we use stress as a great excuse for why we consume alcohol, or cheat on our spouses, or use profanity, drowning our minds in mindless entertainment. or for being hateful.

4. Moses apparently believed that his time in Midian relieved him of the responsibility to obey God's covenant demands.

5. Obedience is required no matter where we are.

5. So God sets out to show Moses exactly how serious he takes breaking the covenant.

A. Remember, that when covenants were made, the parties would cut an animal in two and would walk through the two halves.

1. This symbolized that, to break the covenant would result in death of the guilty party.

2. Yet, here is Moses getting ready to represent God and this Covenant, and he was walking in defiance of that agreement.

3. **Disobedience brings death...always.**

B. This is where things get muddy again.

1. Scholars don't agree on exactly what is happening.

a. Who, exactly, isn't circumcised?

b. Is God making Moses sick, and that is why his wife takes notice?

c. How long is taking place?

2. If it is Gershom who is not circumcised, how old is he?

3. If it is Eliezer, then did Moses circumcise the first male but not the second?

C. What I believe is happening is this:

1. Moses has not circumcised either of his sons.

2. But it is the failure to circumcise the firstborn that God is punishing here.

a. I also cannot believe that Gershom is a small boy at this time.

b. Moses has been married for around 40 years.

c. If Moses would have had trouble fathering a child, I think it would have been mentioned especially since there are many stories like that in Genesis.

d. Therefore, Gershom could have been in his 30's at this point, which is not strange that an adult son would travel with his parents at an older age:

1. Moses was still with his father-in-law at 80.
2. Abraham left his father later in life too.
3. The extended family was very much the norm in Middle-Eastern cultures.

D. On this night, as God prepares to kill Moses, Moses is once again saved by a woman.

1. Writer John Goldingay says: Fortunately, even a Midianite woman knows a man needs to be circumcised (it was a common practice in Middle Eastern culture, though God had given it a new significance in making it the sign of a covenant with Abraham and his people). How fine that it is Zipporah who has to take the decisive action to save Moses. Once again he owes his life to a woman's initiative. Once again the exodus story would have derailed had it not been for a woman's action.¹

2. Zipporah knows what is up.

a. She knows that her Hebrew husband is walking in disobedience.

b. Even though she was from Midian, and her father was a Midianite Priest, they were descendants of Abraham through Keturah.

c. They may not have practiced circumcision, but they knew that Moses should have.

¹ John Goldingay, [*Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone*](#), Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2010), 26.

3. So Zipporah intervenes and saves Moses from God's judgment.

a. As a side note, we don't hear from Zipporah and the sons until Exodus 18.

b. We know that, at some point, Moses sends them back to live with Jethro in Midian.

c. One reason for this is found in her phrase "Bridegroom of blood".

d. This is not a happy woman.

e. Maybe she is the reason why Moses hadn't been obedient and now she is holding that against him.

f. For whatever reason, Moses' family does not go through the events of the next chapters with Moses.

E. Again, why is God so serious about this?

1. Because, in Exodus, sins committed by one eventually end up being national and generational sins.

2. Moses' rejection of the Covenant sign of circumcision becomes a national problem.

3. Let me share with you what happens 40 years in the future from Joshua 5:2-9

Joshua 5:2-9 (CSB)

²At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelite men again." ³So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelite men at Gibeath-haaraloth. ⁴This is the reason Joshua circumcised them: All the people who came out of Egypt who were males—all the men of war—had died in the wilderness along the way after they had come out of Egypt. ⁵**Though all the people who came out were circumcised, none of the people born in the wilderness along the way were circumcised after they had come out of Egypt.** ⁶For the Israelites wandered in the wilderness forty years until all the nation's men of war who came out of Egypt had died off because they did not obey the LORD. So the LORD vowed

never to let them see the land he had sworn to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷He raised up their sons in their place; it was these Joshua circumcised. *They were still uncircumcised, since they had not been circumcised along the way.* ⁸*After the entire nation had been circumcised, they stayed where they were in the camp until they recovered.* ⁹*The LORD then said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the disgrace of Egypt from you."* Therefore, that place is still called **Gilgal** (remember the series on 1 Samuel 4-7?). today.

F. Moses' sin represented what would become a national problem:

1. A whole generation who saw the miracles in Egypt, and still rejected the covenant.
2. A whole generation that walked in fear and unbelief.
3. They refused to believe that God would do what he had promised:
 1. That God wouldn't set them free from Egypt.
 2. That God wouldn't lead them to the Promised Land.
 3. That God wouldn't provide for them in the wilderness.
 4. That God wouldn't overwhelm the enemies of the Promised Land so that they could conquer.
 5. Ultimately, the generation that left Egypt did not believe that God would keep his part of the covenant.
 6. And if God did not keep his part, then why should they keep their part and circumcise their sons!
4. **This story of Moses predicts and prepares the reader for the future sin of Israel.**
5. If we don't deal ruthlessly with our past sins through the blood of Jesus Christ, we are doomed to repeat those sins and pass them on.

Application: How does this effect my life and walk with Jesus?

A. Big idea: Some of us are walking in open disobedience in one or more areas of our lives and still expecting God to bless the rest.

#1. When we withhold from God in one area, the rest loses the blessing.

- a. Often, sin is symbolized by “yeast” and a little yeast leavens the whole bowl.
- b. We believe that disobedience doesn’t affect all of us, but only that part but sin affects all of us because we are an integrated whole.
- c. Moses had finally submitted to go where God had told him.
- d. Moses was prepared to say what needed to be said and do what needed to be done.
- e. But, he hadn’t submitted his son to the covenant promises and, in God’s eyes, that was rebellion.

#2. The battle you are fighting will not be won apart from God’s covenant.

- a. You cannot do it alone.
- b. Maybe, by now, you have heard God’s call for your life and know what He wants you to do.
- c. You are now walking in obedience, or at least in the direction God wants you to go.
- d. But never forget that **Calling cannot be separated from Covenant.**
- e. When we separate who we are in Jesus from what we do for Jesus, we lose out on the power that enables us.

#3. Nothing kills ministry and calling quicker than hypocrisy.

- a. Moses was getting ready to be an agent of judgment to Pharaoh while being a hypocrite himself.

b. While God always uses imperfect people, and sometimes uses hypocrites, God's desire is for all of us to walking in Spirit and Truth.

c. When we minister according to God's Spirit and God's Truth, we avoid the falsehood and hypocrisy that so often stains our efforts.

B. Today, I ask "Are you being faithful?"

a. Are you walking in obedience to God in every area of your life?

1. What is one area that God has been challenging you in?
2. Tithing?
3. Personal worship?
4. Attitude or words?

b. Are you mindful of who is watching?

1. Moses didn't realize God was watching how he was raising his sons and he almost died.
2. Moses didn't realize that Zipporah was watching Moses' hypocrisy and it drove a wedge between them.
3. Then Moses demonstrated the covenant before Israel and, because of what they saw, they believed in God.
4. Will the people watching you today end up believing in God tomorrow?