

“Circumcision of the Heart – Radical Obedience”

Exodus 4:18-31

February 13, 2005

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“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

That statement was made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who not much later was executed by the Nazi government because of his commitment to Jesus Christ.

The word “disciple” occurs 264 times in the Gospels and Acts in the NT.

Although originally it meant an apprentice in a trade or the student of a teacher, the NT defines the concept as a man or a woman who is sold out to Christ.

It is not just someone who necessarily yet understands what all that will entail, but they have made up their mind that Jesus is Lord and they are willing to learn and obey.

- They are ordering their lives by Jesus’ priorities.
- They eat, breath and sleep, “Jesus.”
- They seek first the kingdom of God.

Every one of us is called by God to that discipleship-relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is no room in the Bible for a man or a woman to say, “Well, I’m a Christian but I just haven’t gotten around to truly allowing Jesus to order my life.

I think there is ample evidence in the Bible to say that anyone who is not a disciple is not a Christian.

As I said, that doesn’t mean we now understand fully all that means, or that we unfailingly live up to what we already know it means, but it does mean we have turned around – Christ is Lord.

I love the name of our high school ministry – “180.”

That very name calls students to that radical 180-degree turn around from following themselves to truly following Jesus as his disciple.

The call of God on our lives is clear and complete.

The Triune God said, "You shall no other gods before me."

God, the Son said, Matthew 10:37-39 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

That's what Bonhoeffer was talking about when he wrote:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

When God truly saves a man or a woman, when he calls them to himself, he will not let them forever drift through life in "easy-chair" Christianity.

We may resist God's work in our lives to conform us to His image, but I'm convinced he loves us enough to break us.

Hebrews 12:8-10 "If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

In our on-going study of the book of Exodus, the main human character, Moses, is slowly learning that lesson.

General Tommy Franks was selected to lead the coalition forces into Iraq.

General Dwight Eisenhower commanded the allied forces in Operation Overlord on D-Day.

In our text today we have a fugitive-prince-turned-shepherd, namely, Moses, appointed to liberate a people of 2 million plus from their slavery in the strongest nation on earth.

Two weeks ago when we looked at how God called him to the task, we discovered that Moses was anything but a willing leader.

He fought God each step of the way.

In chapter 3 through the first half of chapter 4 we heard Moses resisting:

- He began by saying he had no authority.
- He then questioned the authority, the capability of God.
- Moses said he had no credibility.
- He said he had no ability.
- Lastly he admitted he was not certain he could trust God.

But God patiently met each objection, giving Moses evidence of God's call on his life and God's ability to see him through.

God was patient, that is until the final objection when Moses challenged the trustworthiness of God.

Exodus 4:15 "Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses..."

It appears that Moses got the point that it wasn't more information he needed, it wasn't more evidence of God's faithfulness, it was a decision he needed to make – **would** he trust God.

The fundamental character trait of a man or woman of God is not competence but dependence – dependence on God.

We are not told how that issue was resolved but apparently Moses is ready to obey.

He has been commissioned by God to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of their slavery and out of that country to a country of their own.

Now it seems to me that Moses is finally ready and if I were retelling the events I would shift the scene immediately to Egypt where Moses begins to confront the Pharaoh with demand to release the Israelites.

Which is precisely what we find in chapter 5.

Exodus 5:1 "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 desert.'"

But the author of Exodus doesn't go there yet.

There is still more that we need to hear about the preparation of this man Moses and God's continuing work in us as his disciples.

Please stand for the reading of God's holy word:

Exodus 4:18-31

Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me go back to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive."

Jethro said, "Go, and I wish you well."

^{EX 4:19} Now the LORD had said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead."²⁰ So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. And he took the staff of God in his hand.

^{EX 4:21} The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go."²² Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son,"²³ and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.' "

^{EX 4:24} At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him.²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said.²⁶ So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

^{EX 4:27} The LORD said to Aaron, "Go into the desert to meet Moses." So he met Moses at the mountain of God and kissed him.²⁸ Then Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and also about all the miraculous signs he had commanded him to perform.

^{EX 4:29} Moses and Aaron brought together all the elders of the Israelites,³⁰ and Aaron told them everything the LORD had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people,³¹ and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped."

May God bless the hearing of his inspired Word?

“Spirit of God, illuminate our understanding so that we may learn and apply your truth to our lives today.”

I commend to your consideration the idea that verses 24-26 are the heart of why the author paused on his way to chapter 5.

Exodus 4:24-26 “At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. ²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. ²⁶ So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

It's true that verses 18-31 give us some details about the time between God's call of Moses at the burning bush and when he actually arrives back in Egypt.

Yes, Moses gets his father-in-law's blessing.

But even in that I think there is a hint at a problem in Moses.

Exodus 4:18 Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me go back to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive." Jethro said, "Go, and I wish you well."

God had told Moses that the people were alive and that Moses was to lead them out.

I don't know why Moses dissembles in his remarks to his father-in-law.

He wasn't commissioned to go back to see if they were alive but to lead them out.

It makes me suspicious Moses is still holding back.

- He's obeying God but there is something not right.
- He's obedient, but not completely.

And yes, in these verses, we are told that the Pharaoh will resist and that God will participate in that resistance.

Exodus 4:21 “The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I

have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

That certainly anticipates a tension, with which we will have to eventually deal when we see God hardening Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardening his own heart.

But that is for a later sermon.

And, it is true that we see Moses and Aaron getting together, which God had allowed in accommodating Moses' reluctance.

Exodus 4:27-28 "The LORD said to Aaron, "Go into the desert to meet Moses." So he met Moses at the mountain of God and kissed him. ²⁸ Then Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and also about all the miraculous signs he had commanded him to perform.

And finally, it is true that we see Moses and Aaron back in Egypt convincing the elders of Israel of God's intentions.

Exodus 4:29-31 "Moses and Aaron brought together all the elders of the Israelites, ³⁰ and Aaron told them everything the LORD had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people, ³¹ and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped."

But right in the middle of all of that is this very odd event:

Exodus 4:24 "At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him."

God spent all this time preparing Moses – protecting his life from the Pharaoh's death sentence when he was born, placing him in the Pharaoh's own palace for the connections and training he would need in the years to come, putting him in the wilderness for 40 years to shape his character, and then calling him in the dramatic fashion of a voice from a burning bush.

And now he's going to kill him?

There are certainly some things about these verses that we don't understand.

Exodus 4:24-26 “At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. ²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. ²⁶ So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

We don't know what Moses' wife, Zipporah, meant when she said to Moses, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.”

Apparently even by the time it was written in this retelling of the event, that statement was arcane or obscure enough that the author had to tell the first readers that it was referring to circumcision.”

I think we can safely assume we don't need to know what the phrase means to get the message of this event.

What does seem quite clear is that Moses was in trouble.

It is also clear that it is Moses' son who is here circumcised.

Zipporah is the one who did it.

And when she circumcised the son, the Lord let Moses alone – that is, let him live.

To understand what is happening here we need to go back 400 plus years to God's command to Abraham when God initiated the covenant between himself and Abraham and his descendants:

Genesis 17:9-12 “Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised...”

It is very clear in the OT that circumcision didn't create or keep the covenant between God and man.

The true covenant was made and kept in the heart.

Deuteronomy 30:6 “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that

you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

But the outward sign of that covenant was circumcision. And if anyone refused to circumcise his son it was obvious he or she was not part of the family of God; God was not their LORD.

By the time of this event, Moses' son is probably over 30 years of age.

What had Moses failed to do? Circumcise his own son!

In chapter 12, just before the great exodus from Egypt, God tells his people to get ready to leave.

The most significant event leading up to their leaving was the killing of the firstborn sons of all Egyptians and the Passover, which protected the firstborn sons of the Israelites.

We'll come to the story eventually, but most of you know that God told the Israelites to slaughter a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their houses so that the angel of death would "pass over" their houses, not killing their firstborn sons.

Here is what God says about those who will be part of the Passover and the great exodus.

Exodus 12:48 "No uncircumcised male (will participate).

Now let's go back to Exodus 4:24-26 and God's threat on Moses' life. Here, God's human instrument to deliver his people from Egypt, the great leader Moses, has not obeyed the central outward act indicative of the covenant relationship with God.

And if Moses has not obeyed the outward act, what does it suggest about the inward condition of his heart?

Moses is getting ready to do a great work with God when he hasn't even attended to the basics of his relationship with God.

He was apparently ready to do significant things **for** God when he didn't care enough about the Lordship of God in his life to have attended to the lesser things.

Why hadn't Moses circumcised his son when he was 8 days old?
 Why hadn't he taken care of that important business before now?

Did Moses get so busy with life that he didn't consider obedience to God, on such an external matter, to be of any real importance?

Moses had disregarded this sacred responsibility and evidently had no intention of doing it.

It's as if God is saying, "Moses, you are about to engage the Egyptians and to bring my judgment on them for their sin.

"How can you take on that role when you stand in disobedience?

"Do you not take me seriously?"

Another indication to me that verses 24-26 are not just weirdly misplaced is what the author is talking about in Exodus 4:22-23

"Then say to Pharaoh, `This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.' "

God calls the people of Israel his "firstborn son."

The "firstborn" in those cultures was uniquely set apart.

Further God says, "Let my son go, so he may worship me."

They belong to God not to another.

Now to Pharaoh, Moses was to say, "But you refused to let (my son) go; so I will kill your firstborn son."

Obviously this is a reference to the 10th plague that would afflict Egypt.

Now the next thing in our text is God about to kill Moses.

Why?

Is it because Moses has not given **his** firstborn son to the Lord; has not let his firstborn son go to worship the Lord?

Again it's as if God is saying, "Moses, you are about to engage the Egyptians and to bring my judgment on them for their sin.

"How can you take on that role when you stand in disobedience?"

"Do you not take me seriously?"

God wants men and women who are "sold out."

God wants a man who will take God seriously.

No, circumcision didn't earn anyone a relationship with God.

Salvation was and is by grace through faith.

But God says that the one who is saved by grace **belongs** to Him.

God's intention is to remake us into his image.

And God will brook nothing less than complete obedience - not half way, not partial but full allegiance, single devotion.

"You shall have no other gods before me."

I truthfully don't know if Moses' failure at this point was due to carelessness, unbelief, or rebellion.

But I think it makes no difference.

God wanted a man wholly devoted to Him.

And he could not allow Moses to go forward until this matter had been dealt with.

Would Moses be wholly devoted to God?

Why does Zipporah, Moses' wife, do the chore instead of Moses?

We don't know but we can speculate that the way God threatened Moses' life was through sickness.

What we **can** know is that whatever kept Moses from actually doing the circumcision did not stop God from applying Zipporah's obedience to Moses.

Moses must have understood what God was doing and his wife's obedience vicariously became Moses' obedience.

The evidence of that is that God withdrew the threat. Exodus 4:26 "So the LORD let him alone."

Obedience is not optional.

There is no excuse for disobedience.

Let me first of all apply this to those who would be leaders in God's work in the church and world.

Are you a teacher in Sunday School, a Bible study leader, a youth worker, one who prays for the sick or serves in any other way?

God will find someone else to do his work if we attempt to work with unconsecrated hearts and un-surrendered wills.

Even after 80 years of preparation by God, Moses was dispensable – God didn't need him.

The one who proclaims the word of God must be servant to that word.

Tell me, Christian leaders, have you come so far in your life and ministry that you think you can overlook some things.

Oh, we used to be diligent in hearing and obeying God.

But we've let some things go, considering them unimportant.

Do we still take God seriously?

Whether we are leaders or not, God's call on our lives is full surrender of all of life to his loving control.

We want to call ourselves Christians but still hang on to certain areas of life.

In Hebrews 12:1 the Bible says, "Let us throw off...the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

What is the sin that you so easily fall into or maybe you've even given up confronting?

- I want to serve God but I don't have to deal with that grudge I have toward so and so.
- I want to serve God but I'll hold off on any real financial stewardship, giving any significant amount of money to kingdom work, until I have my financial house in better order.

- I want to serve God but I won't give up my illicit relationship with my boyfriend or girlfriend or I won't give up the lust I indulge in.
- I want to serve God but I won't discipline myself to be a man or woman of prayer, or one who studies God's Word.

I can overlook the "little" things. They won't matter.

God's not looking for perfection but he demands radical obedience.

God was gracious enough to confront Moses straight on.

Is he confronting you today?

Oh, he worked on me this week as I studied this passage.

How will we respond?