**Rescued: Hardly Grace or Grace in the Hard**

Exodus 3:16-20

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A little over 12 years ago our twins were born and within days we were down at Children’s hospital. Five-pound Jaxon had a heart that would suddenly jump to over 300 beats a minute while he simultaneously bled internally. And let me tell you, watching someone so small suffer was totally unnerving.

If you’ve ever had a child with health issues, you know it can shake your faith. I remember hours of prayer, swinging between begging God for healing and angrily demanding answers. I used words with God I’ve never used on people.

Yet in the middle of that pain, Nikki and I kept seeing God’s fingerprints. Someone would say something encouraging; people we didn’t know dropped off meals; a verse in my devotions would speak directly to my questions. Again and again God showed up, and we came through not only believing but praising Him for His goodness.

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But not everyone’s story goes that way. And I don’t just mean when children aren’t healed – I know some of you have walked that road. But I mean that people can endure the very same suffering and come away with opposite conclusions about God.

Take Bart Ehrman. He’s a brilliant theologian you’ve possibly seen on National Geographic specials about the Bible. But he’s also one of the most outspoken critics of Christianity. Why? Well, after growing up Christian and studying theology eventually suffering undid his faith. Ehrman says:

For most of my life I was a devout and committed Christian.… [But] Eventually, I could no longer explain how there can be a good and powerful God actively involved in this world, given the state of things. … The problem of suffering became for me the most powerful reason to doubt the existence of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So here we are: two people facing suffering – yet one comes out praising God, and the other rejecting Him. How does that work?

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If you’ve got a Bible, go ahead and open it up to Exodus 3. This fall we’re walking through the story of Moses, where God reveals His character and saves His people from slavery. And today we’re picking up at the burning bush, with God sending Moses to Pharaoh. Let’s start in verse 16. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Exodus 3:16-20]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Exodus is the defining moment where God introduces Himself to His people. This means if we want to know who God is – not just who we want Him to be, but who He is – this is where we must begin.

Now while we only read a little section in chapter 3, today we’ll actually be covering Exodus 3 to 10. So if you want to go deeper in this series, I encourage you to read through Exodus on your own. We simply can’t cover it all. But I want to look at this section of text from three angles: the story, the elephant and the treasure.[[2]](#footnote-2)

First the story which unfolds around two themes – Moses has a staff and Pharaoh gets some plagues.

So at the bush God tells Moses he’s been chosen to deliver Israel from slavery. And last week we saw Moses object – “Pharaoh’s the most powerful man in the world and I’m a fugitive shepherd. I’m not qualified.” But God doesn’t accept his whiny excuse so in chapter 4 Moses tries again: “What if people don’t believe I’ve met God in some burning shrubbery?”

It’s a fair concern. But God isn’t thrown and responds with His own question: “What’s in your hand Moses?” “It’s a staff.” “Throw it on the ground.” “Okay.” And boom it’s a snake. And Moses is terrified which is weak. I mean it’s not like it was a spider.

But then God tells Moses to pick it up, and it turns back into a staff and God explains:

“Perform this sign… then they will believe that the Lord… really has appeared to you.” (Exodus 4:4-5)

Now why the snake bit? Like if God wanted to impress Pharaoh, why not the Darth Vader chokehold? That would get some attention. But God’s not trying to get Pharaoh’s attention, He’s making a point.

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So remember back to the garden of Genesis and how evil was depicted physically? Do you remember what shape it took? A snake. And guess what Pharaoh wears on his crown? A cobra. Here’s the mask of Tutankhamun. And all the Pharaohs wore this.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Now this isn’t a coincidence, there’s a connection being drawn between evil and Pharaoh – these are the same thing in the text. And what we are entering into is divine combat. I AM is going to wage war against the evil of the world in order to deliver His people.

And so with stick in hand Moses heads over the Pharaoh and sings that song – join me if you know the words – “Pharaoh, Pharaoh, O Baby let my people go.”

And down goes the rod and it becomes a snake… and Pharaoh’s not impressed. Snake charming was a thing in Egypt, and his magicians can do the same trick – of course Moses’ snake eats their snakes. But Pharaoh just shrugs and responds:

Who is YHWH? Why should I listen to Him and let Israel go? I don’t know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” (Exodus 5:2)

In fact, not only does Pharaoh stick to his guns, but he makes their slavery harsher – he forces them to gather their own straw while producing the same number of bricks. Now a great result. So think about this: Moses does exactly what God says, and life gets worse. Aren’t things supposed to get better when you start following God?

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If you’ve ever wondered that you are in good company. In chapter 5 Moses takes his complaint right to the top, “God, why did you send me to Pharaoh? You’ve done nothing to rescue Your people.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Moses is frustrated and doesn’t understand what God is doing. And God’s response:

“Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. When he feels the force of My strong hand, he will let the people go. In fact, he will force them to leave his land!...

I will free you from your oppression and will rescue you from your slavery….I will claim you as My own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I AM the LORD your God. (Exodus 6:1-7)

So even though it doesn’t make sense to Moses God has a plan. He’s not simply arm-wrestling Pharaoh for the win; He’s revealing who He is and winning the worship of His people. He is I AM. And He wants to be their God.

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Two weeks ago we talked about how Exodus doesn’t end with the crossing of the Red Sea, instead it continues into a long section about building the Tabernacle. And it looks anticlimactic to us because we don’t realize that the point of Exodus isn’t simply about God freeing His people from slavery, He is leading them to trade their worship of gods that fail into worship of the true God who rescues and gives freedom.

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See Israel, like us, had built their lives around other things in Egypt. There was food on the table every night. They had jobs. They had some autonomy… and they were slaves. And the funny thing about being slaves is that it was just as hard for Moses to get Pharaoh to let the people go as it was to get the people to stop being slaves.

And this is true for us too. So there might be things in your life that have enslaved you and yet you struggle to want to cast them off because they give you some level of comfort or pleasure. And if that jogs something in your mind we’ve got a few spots left in Freedom Session. Sign up with the QR code or at the welcome booth in the back.

Okay, back to the text. God conveys two points in this section that make what He wants for us clear. First, God demonstrates that He is greater than the gods we make in our own image and second, He alone – not Pharaoh, not Moses, not any of our made-up gods – can truly rescue and give the life we seek.

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So last week we talked about how we create gods in our own image – gods who value what we value and see things our way. And that’s exactly how the Egyptian pantheon was set up as well.

And when you see this, you realize that the plagues weren’t random acts of cruelty. Instead God was dismantling Egypt’s false gods one by one. So the Nile turns to blood, undermining Osiris whose lifeblood was said to flow through it. Then frogs overrun the land, mocking Heqet, the frog-headed goddess of fertility. And Locusts destroy the crops, showing that Neper, god of grain, was powerless. And darkness falls over Egypt, humiliating Ra, the mighty sun god. There’s a god targeted by each plague.

So YHWH was systematically dethroning Egypt’s gods in order to show that He isn’t like the gods we make up that are actually powerless to deliver. He is I AM.

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But why not start with the final plague and end it right there? Why 10 plagues during which not only all of Egypt suffers like crazy, but even Moses suffers. Like imagine how he felt after he talked big and threw his staff down only to watch Pharaoh’s magicians do the same. It would have been humiliated. Why does God do it this way? It’s because God isn’t only proving He was big; He was showing that He alone can rescue.

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So everyone trusts in something. For some it’s education – “I’m going to study hard and get the right job. Then I’ll be secure.” For others it’s relationships: “If only I could find the right spouse I’d be complete.” Or it could be health – “I’m strong and young so I’m happy.” But anything we center ourselves around other than God will ultimately disappoint.

And God doesn’t want His people to fall into this trap. Not even Moses. So what trap could Moses have fallen into? Well, imagine if every time Moses showed up things went exactly as he planned. What would that do to you? How quickly would he start to think “I did that.” We do this all the time: we cry out to God in crisis, but when the problem lifts, we take the credit. “I worked hard and paid off my debts.” “I got myself out of that toxic job.” I was diligent and got healthy. We’re experts in taking credit for what God does. And so God graciously allows Moses to fail so he will learn to trust God instead of himself.

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Actually it’s not just Moses that this happened to, the same thing happened to Paul. In 2nd Corinthians he talks about some of the times God didn’t answer his prayers but allowed him to suffer. He says:

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself…. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead…. On Him we have set our hope. (2 Corinthains 1:8-10)

So imagine what Paul would be praying as he is pressed beyond his ability to endure. He was praying what we’d all be praying – “God make this stop!” But God doesn’t Why not? Because He wants what is best for Paul which is that Paul would rely on God instead of himself. See abundant life isn’t life without suffering, abundant life is life with God. And that’s what God wants for Paul. And that’s what God wants for Moses. And that’s what God wants for you as well. He knows what you need.

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That’s the story, but now we arrive at the elephant in the room. So you’re probably aware that this text always shows up in Sunday school curriculum, but when it does it’s always about how the good God of the Bible defeats the evil, baby-killing king of Egypt. And all the church kids sing “Pharaoh, Pharaoh” while everyone outside the church wants to vomit. Have you noticed that elephant? Here it is:

Before any of the plagues happen God tells Moses:

“Go to Pharaoh and perform all the miracles I have empowered you to do. But I will ***harden*** his heart so he will refuse to let the people go. (Exodus 4:21)

Wait a minute: did God just do what I think He did? And if He did, then how is Pharaoh the bad guy here? I mean if God is hardening hearts and causing the very evil He judges it’s no wonder people like Bart Ehrman draw the conclusions they do. If God is real, He can’t be good. So what’s up?

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Now here we need to be honest, this is a messy elephant and there aren’t easy answers. God’s actions often unsettle us, and this is one of those times. But I want to show you how, while the elephant doesn’t go away, it does point us to the treasure we need.

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So, if you read carefully – and I do hope you will read Exodus on your own – you will notice something – there is a progression in the text. Pharaoh hardens his own heart before God ever does. So in the first half of the plagues there is a line that gets repeated – here it is after the frogs go away. We read:

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15)

Now this was the second plague, but this idea gets repeated for the first half of the plagues. It’s only at the sixth plague that there is a transition and God gets involved. There we read:

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses (Exodus 9:12)

So there’s a progression. The hardness starts with Pharaoh – he really is killing babies in front of their moms; he’s a snake in the grass. And he remains firmly committed to his position in spite of 5 plagues proving God’s presence.

And so in the second half of the plagues where God hardens his heart He isn’t making Pharaoh act out of character, but is only solidifying him in his determination in order to ensure God’s redemptive history takes place.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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Okay, hold onto the yucky feeling in your gut, it’s not going to go away, instead I’m going to point you to a New Testament parallel. Paul actually picks up the Exodus theme in Romans. So in Romans 1 Paul is talking about people who refuse to acknowledge God and we read:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts (Romans 1:24)

So, similar to Pharaoh, the sinful desires in the people’s hearts didn’t come from God, He simply let them run after their own demise. God lets us destroy ourselves is we are determined to reject Him. C.S. Lewis puts it like this: in the end, all prayers boil down to one of two: “God, not my will but Yours be done.” Or, “God, not Your will, but mine be done.”[[6]](#footnote-6) And He gives us what we ask. So God hardens what Pharaoh had already committed himself to hardening.

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But that’s not the end of it. A little later, in Romans Paul continues wrestling with Pharaoh’s story. The Bible takes what God does with Pharaoh seriously and the tension remains. See the whole problem of how a good God could allow suffering isn’t just a modern objection, it’s been there from the beginning.

And the Bible doesn’t give an easy answer. The elephant remains – While God doesn’t initiate Pharaoh’s hard heart or cause suffering, He plays some role in both of these. In other words, it’s clear that God doesn’t do what we think He should do. We think a good God should have to eradicate evil and suffering, and when He doesn’t we object. But to that objection God replies, “I’m not interested in being who you want Me to be because I’m way bigger than you are capable of desiring – I AM. And all I will tell you is I am working all things out – all suffering and even the evil actions of a tyrant – to accomplish My good purposes.” And so the call to us is not to try to understand what God is doing, but to trust Him in it.

So will you soften your heart and do that? Or does the God who spoke creation into existence have to make everything He does make sense to you?

Paul doesn’t think so, and so instead of trying to explain everything God is doing, in Romans 9 he just highlights how the elephant points to the treasure.

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So Paul acknowledges, “God shows mercy to whom He is going to show mercy and hardens who He is going to harden” but His decisions aren’t random, instead they are aimed at one specific purpose – leading people to His glory. So Paul concludes the section on Pharaoh by asking:

What if God… bore with great patience the objects of His wrath—prepared for destruction… to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory (Romans 9:22-23)

Now Paul’s not saying this solves every question about Pharaoh’s hard heart, just that it does reveal God’s heart. Everything God does is aimed at drawing people into His glory. And this is the point of Romans because it’s the point of Exodus. See God’s people don’t just need freedom from slavery – what we need is to switch from worshipping or centering ourselves around things that enslave us to centering ourselves around the only God who can rescue.

And that’s why the key word in Romans 9 is “glory” – God wants us to recognize His glory. Now glory means “weight” or “gravity.” And the idea is that if you put yourself at the center of your solar system, everything falls apart. Imagine if Earth were at the center – it would be chaos and plagues. Life couldn’t survive. But when the sun is at the center, everything holds together. And God says I want to be at your center for your good.

And this is God’s rescue plan. This is the treasure. He is the joy your heart was made for. So it’s like the Psalmist writes:

In Your presence *is* fullness of joy;  
At Your right hand *are* pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:11 NKJV)

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And this is what God wanted for Moses and Israel and wants for us. And so, when He saw you trapped in slavery so thick you didn’t even want out, He sent a rescuer. And 3500 years ago Moses was the foreshadow of who that Rescuer would be. And through Moses God showed the power of His glorious hand to deliver while hardening the heart of Pharaoh until he let the people go.

But this was only the foretaste of what was to come. In due course God would put on skin and walk among us to initiate His ultimate rescue plan. Jesus came to swallow up the full hardness of humanities hearts by taking the punishment of all the evil and suffering we could dish out into Himself. And He took it to the grave and then rose again so He could offer new and abundant life to everyone who will let Him soften their hearts.

So don’t’ get stuck trying to figure out everything God is doing. Instead choose to soften your heart and trust who God reveals Himself to be. It’s true He’s not the god you wish He was – He’s not trying to be – He is the great I AM. So don’t’ harden your heart lest He turn you over to it. Instead let His glory, His weight, hold your life together. If you will then even as you encounter suffering you will find, like the Psalmist, that He is good and He wants good for you.

1. Bart Ehrman, God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our most Important Question – Why we Suffer (New York: HarperOne, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Outline adapted from Tyler Staton <https://bridgetown.church/teachings/exodus/the-plagues-pharaohs-hard-heart> (Accessed September 18, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uraeus> (Accessed September 20, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 5:22-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://bibleproject.com/articles/pharaohs-heart-grew-harder/> (Accessed September 20, 2025). For a different take see John Piper <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-hardening-of-pharaoh-and-the-hope-of-the-world> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)