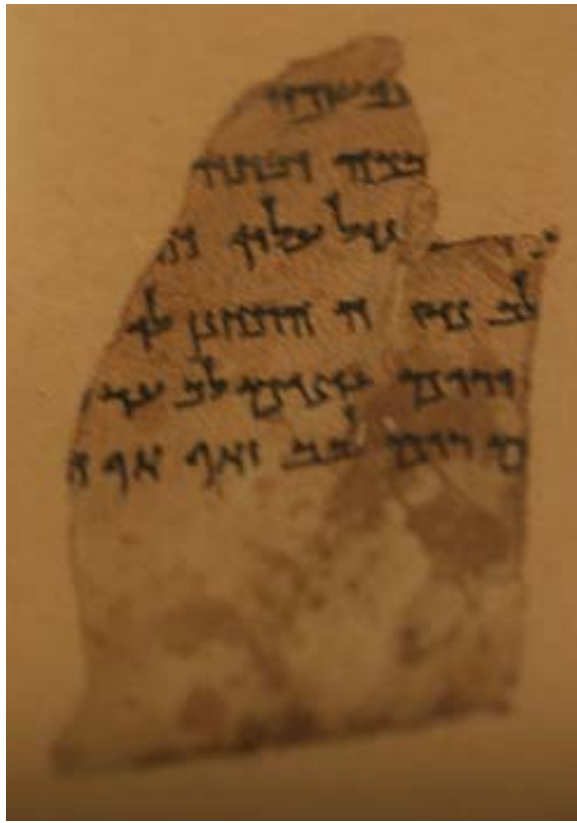


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“REJECTION”
EXODUS 4&5

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The eminent American psychologist Albert Ellis wrote, “More than anything, people are afraid of rejection.”

As a child, *Pyotr Ilyich* dreaded rejection. His domineering mother warned him that, if he wasn’t a good little boy, God would reject him—and so would she. As hard as he tried, Pyotr was too much of a free spirit to please his stern parents. Their disapproval turned him into an emotional cripple, and eventually drove him to his death.

Despite the fact that young Pyotr was a musical prodigy, they insisted that he train for a solid, middle-class job in the civil service. When he ran off to the music conservatory, they refused to forgive him. He never recovered from that rejection.

Within a few years, Pyotr wrote the music that made the whole world sing. But critics condemned it as too romantic. Fellow musicians dismissed it as shallow. High brows sniffed at it as too sentimental. But common folk flocked to his concerts. He became the most popular composer in his country. He should have been happy. But years of rejection tormented him, plunging him into seasons of suicidal despair.

Yet it was that deep secret that caused most of his anguish. He was a closet homosexual. If the truth ever came out, he would be ruined. So he tried to suppress his feelings by getting married. But she was just like his disapproving mother. After only three months, the marriage ended disastrously. He again felt the excruciating pain of rejection. In the bleak days that followed, he attempted suicide.

He longed to confess his “secret” to his priest, but he feared being ostracized by the church. He surely couldn’t tell his family who already despised him. He thought about confiding in a wealthy widow who had been his patron for thirteen years, but their relationship collapsed. This rejection also drove him to the brink of suicide.

Then a homosexual lover threatened to expose him to the world. He suffered a nervous breakdown. In the end, he was “outed” anyway. A Russian “Court of Honor” condemned him as a degenerate. Unhinged by this final rejection, Pyotr ended his life by drinking poison.

The world remembers Pyotr by his anglicized name, *Peter*—Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Today he is celebrated as the musical genius who wrote such masterpieces as the Overture to *Romeo and Juliet*, scores for ballets like *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and the *Nutcracker Suite*, the stirring *1812 Overture*, a hauntingly-beautiful piano concerto, symphonies, and the opera *Eugene Onegin*. Who would have guessed that such breathtaking beauty was birthed by a tortured soul? Before he committed suicide, he penned these words on a scrap of paper:

“None but the lonely heart can feel my anguish.”

Actually, *no one* can ever really know the anguish of another person's heart—except for Jesus. He has felt Peter's loneliness. He knows all about rejection. He never sinned like Peter. But he was tempted like him. Maybe I'm talking to a Peter Tchaikovsky today. Jesus already knows your deepest secrets. Run to him quickly. He won't reject you. Throw yourself into his open arms, grab hold of his nail-scarred hands, and trust in his tender mercies. Let him take you on an exodus out of your land of bondage to a Promised Land of grace and holiness. For everyone who ever faces rejection, here is another Exodus Principle:

You never stand alone when you stand with God.

Conversely, no one ever stood with God without standing alone. To go to the Promised Land, we *will* have to say goodbye to Egypt. We *will* find ourselves alone in the desert. Moses was rejected by both the Pharaoh and the people of God. Later his own brother and sister turned against him. There were times when he stood alone against the whole world. And so will you—if you commit yourself to an Exodus with Jesus.

There is a high cost to discipleship. Some of you understand Peter Tchaikovsky's anguish all too well. Maybe you never got your parents' approval. Perhaps you were ostracized as a teenager, or abandoned by your spouse, or betrayed by friends, or passed over for a promotion. All of us have felt the stabbing pain of rejection. So we are tempted to avoid standing for Christ—especially if it means even more rejection.

Moses understands your fear of rejection. When he tried to liberate his people, they rejected him. His adopted grandfather condemned him to death. For 40 years he hid on the far side of a desert as an alien among nomads. Even though his emotional scars hadn't yet healed, God told him to go back to Egypt and face rejection again. No wonder he came up with excuses to avoid more of the same pain. But God wants Moses, and the rest of us, to grab hold of these truths:

1. Rejection is an opportunity for self-inventory.

Exodus 4:10 records Moses' final excuse: "I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." Moses is wrong when he says that he was never eloquent. The Holy Spirit tells us in Acts 7:22, "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was *powerful in speech*..." God was ready to use Moses, but he deceived himself that he wasn't usable. Like Moses, most of us either overestimate or underestimate who we are. A friend's wife says to him, "You are only half as good as you think you are, and only half as bad as other people say you are."

Sin entered the world through deception. The most dangerous deceit is self-deceit. In 2 Timothy 3:3, St. Paul says that, in the Last Days, people "...will go from bad to worse, *deceiving* and *being deceived*." Jesus

warns in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven..." He says that even some who preach, heal, and cast out demons will discover that their faith was fraudulent. The road to hell is paved with self-deceit. That's why the half-brother of Jesus says in James 1:16, "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers."

But rejection is a powerful antidote to self-deception. James Lee Burke wrote, "There's nothing like rejection to do an inventory of yourself." Pulitzer Prize winner Carl Sandburg said this about his early attempts to get published: "I wrote poems in the corner of the Brooks Street Station. I sent them to two editors who rejected them right off. I reread their letters of rejection years later and I agreed with those editors." Sandburg says that those early rejections exposed his weakness as a writer, and forced him to reexamine and improve his skills.

Every time his script for *Rocky* was turned down by a studio, Sylvester Stallone reworked it until he birthed the blockbuster movie that won an Oscar. He said, "I take rejection as someone blowing a bugle in my ear to wake me up and get me going rather than retreat." But success spoiled Stallone. When he became a superstar, no one had the guts to reject his scripts. By the time he got to *Rocky IV, V & VI* he was churning out bad movies. Insulation from rejection doesn't make us any stronger.

When he was the *Prince of Egypt*, Moses overestimated his power to lead a slave revolt. During 40 years of desert exile, he was forced to reevaluate everything. But even at age 80, he deceived himself into underestimating his capacity. "O Lord, I have never been eloquent..." Like most of us, he had more self-deception to be pruned away.

This past week, I had lunch with a dear friend just out of prison. My friend was rejected by almost everyone after he committed his felony. Ultimately, he was rejected by society and locked away. But in that place of loneliness, God stripped away years of self-deception. It was a brutal and bleak process. But he comes out a purged man who knows his sins, understands grace, and realizes his need to cling to Christ.

Dear friend, have you been rejected recently? I know it hurts. But it's also an opportunity for self-inventory. It doesn't matter if a lot of the things said to you were false, or mean-spirited, or even unfair. If you will stop defending and nursing your hurt feelings long enough to let God expose self-deception, that rejection will become a surgeon's scalpel to cut away that which keeps you from being all that Christ has redeemed you to become. There is nothing lonelier than rejection. But I want you to take heart from two facts in Exodus Four.

1) God will never make you stand alone.

Moses is desperate in verse thirteen: "O Lord, please send someone else to do it." Verse 14 says, "Then the Lord's anger burned against

Moses..." Our heavenly Father hates disobedience, but also understands human weakness. He knows that he's not calling Moses to an easy thing. Prophets are never popular. History proves that we build monuments to prophets with the same rocks we used to stone them to death. It's deadly dangerous to walk and talk the truth.

But thank God for his tender mercies in verse fourteen: "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite. I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad to see you." After 40 years, Moses is being reunited with his brother. Where he feels weakest, this brother is strongest. Everyone of us needs an *Aaron* to watch our back. When my friend was in prison, God gave him Christian brothers. Now that he's facing the challenges of life after prison, the Covenant family is going to stand with him. We can stand against the world if Aaron stands with us. That's why I challenge you to join a local church and get involved in a small group that will stand with you.

But I must warn you: Aaron *will* let you down. Later, Aaron crafts the golden calf. Later, he teams up with Moses' sister to oppose his leadership. Our most painful rejection will come from brothers and sisters in the family of God. But Proverbs 19:23 says, "...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." Even when our brothers and sisters reject us, there is a friend who knows our anguish. He too was rejected by the people of God. That's why Hebrews 4:13 says of Jesus, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness..." That's also why Hebrews 4:14 can promise, "Let then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need." The friend who sticks closer than a brother will never let us stand alone.

2) God will never make you stand when you can't.

We can only stand so much rejection. Even Jesus came to the end of himself when he cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" God knows how much we are able to bear. He says to Moses in Exodus 4:19, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead." Before it's over, there will be a new crop of folks who want to kill Moses. But, at least for now, God is buying him enough time to do what he has to do. Our Lord never calls us to do something at the wrong time. That's why we have to wait on him, even if it takes 40 years. And God will never call us to do something that is beyond his power in us. When he gives a vision he supplies provision. There are days when his call tests every molecule of our body and soul. During those times, cling tenaciously to St. Paul's promise in I Corinthians 10:13:

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

As we grow up in Christ, we need to remember that there really is life after rejection. I love the humorous approach of author Louise Brown: "I could write an entertaining novel about all the rejection slips I've received, but I fear it would be overly long." But, to turn rejection into a helpful tool for self-inventory, we need to seize a second truth:

2. Don't give up before the inventory is completed.

Rejection is God's discipline. Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time..." You will be tempted to avoid rejection at all costs, even if it means compromising your faith. If you are facing it right now, you probably want to run away like Moses and hide in some desert, or pretend that it isn't happening, or come up with some other dysfunctional behavior to protect yourself. But if you refuse to flinch in the face of this discipline, Hebrews 12:11 says, "...Later on it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." Hebrews 12:12 concludes, "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees..." When we feel like giving up, we need to strengthen ourselves with these facts:

1) Rejection by Pharaohs is not personal.

In Egypt, Moses is given a hero's welcome by his slave family. They are overjoyed that God heard their prayers and is going to set them free. But happy revival turns to harsh reality. Moses stands before the god-king of Egypt to deliver a command from his God that can be reduced to four words in Exodus 5:1: "Let my people go!" The god-king responds in verse two, "Who is the LORD that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD; and I will not let Israel go."

Moses could take this rejection as personal. But this isn't *his* battle. He's just the ringside announcer for a super heavyweight battle: "Ladies and gentlemen, in this corner is the great *I AM!*" Like some ancient *Muhammed Ali*, Pharaoh mugs to the ringside crowd, "I don't even know the LORD." This God of slaves can't be much of a LORD. But Pharaoh makes the biggest blunder of his life by underestimating his opponent.

Back to the ringside announcer: "In the other corner, introducing the king of Egypt. He is a god on earth, worshipped by the people, his glory inscribed on pyramids, and his person backed by the most powerful empire in world history! Now, let's get ready to rummmmmble!" This epic fight will be a power encounter between the great *I AM* and the pretender god of Egypt. The great *I AM* will clobber this god-king with ten rounds of plague. In the end, Pharaoh's armies will go down for the count, and Egypt will never recover her former glory.

If we are rejected by the people of this world, it's not personal. They are rejecting the God in us. If they hated Jesus, they will hate us. Like Pharaoh, they joke about our God as the creation of uncool, uneducated, unscientific fundamentalism. Nonbelieving relatives dismiss our bible-

based values as judgmental and narrow-minded. Let me repeat: it's not personal. But it will expose our pride, and bring out the worst in us. That's okay. God is using the pagans to purge our sin. The more our faith is attacked, the better it will become.

2) Rejection by God's people is perfecting.

In the first round, the god-king lands a vicious uppercut. He loads even more work on the Jewish slaves. Instead of freedom, Moses has made their bondage worse. In Exodus 5:20 they lash out at Moses, "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." To be attacked by God's people is the cruelest blow of all. When rejection comes lathered with god-talk it's even worse: "May the Lord look upon you and judge you!" After 35 years of being a pastor, I can tell you that the most ungodly rejection comes in the most sanctimonious language from the most pious people. Even Jesus was taken back when Judas betrayed him with a kiss. God's people can be unspeakably cruel. They are even capable of crucifying their Savior.

But rejection brings perfection. At age forty, Moses murdered a man in a fit of anger. At age eighty, when he saw God's people worshipping the golden calf, we exploded in anger and smashed the Stone Tablets of the Law to smithereens. At age 85, when God's people complained about a lack of water, he smacked the rock instead of speaking to it as the Lord commanded. That outburst of anger kept him out of the Promised Land. But, eventually Moses overcame his abiding sin. Toward the end of his life, God could say in Numbers 12:3, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." Even the most painful rejection by God's people perfects us. Joseph's brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery. For the next twelve years Joseph experienced one rejection after another. But those rejections perfected Joseph and set in motion a chain of events that put him in a position to save his people from a famine. May we all come to the place where we can say what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20: "What you meant for my heart, God meant for my good..."

3) Rejecting God reveals the *Pharaoh* still in us.

Rejection runs downhill. The Pharaoh rejects God and oppresses God's people even more. God's people respond by rejecting Moses. Moses reacts by lashing out at God in Exodus 5:22&23, "O Lord why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all." Isn't it fascinating how everything goes full circle? Pharaoh scorns God; God's people scorn Moses; and Moses scorns God. In the end, the Pharaoh and the Prophet both question the will of God. Remember what we learned in Exodus, chapter three: Moses has the faith of Abraham he learned at

his Jewish mother's breast. But he also has the way of thinking that he learned from his adopted grandfather, the old Pharaoh. Like Moses, we all have too much of Egypt in us. We think we know better than God. That's why we need to be purged and pruned by rejection.

4) We need to avoid rejection by God at all cost.

This is the rejection we should fear most. Let's look at a frightening moment when Moses was going back to Egypt from the Sinai. Exodus 4:24, says that the LORD came after Moses to kill him. How strange! God has called Moses to go to Egypt to free his people. And now he is going to kill him, because he neglected to circumcise his son? Why is that such a big deal? It is the sign of God's covenant with Abraham that promises the Savior of the world. God has commanded all descendents of Abraham to put the sign of the covenant on their children. To forget that, is to disobey God. By forgetting to circumcise his son, Moses was saying that the covenant of grace was unimportant. In a way he was denying the Christ who was yet to come.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. But Moses' wife Zipporah quickly circumcises their firstborn son and puts his bloody foreskin on his feet. Exodus 4:16 says, "So the Lord let him alone." What saves us from God's rejection? The Gospel of Christ is our only hope. You see it prefigured here. The blood of Zipporah's son covers Moses. In the same way another mother, Mary gave her firstborn son to be cut so that his blood would cover those under the death sentence of God. A prophet had said to Mary at her son's circumcision, "And a sword will pierce your heart."

That gospel will again be prefigured in the last plague on Passover night. The death angel will kill the firstborn sons of Egypt avenging all the Jewish baby boys who have been slaughtered by the Egyptians. But the blood of the lamb, sprinkled on the doorposts of Jewish homes, will save them from the wrath of God. Just as the Egyptian god-king's firstborn son is killed, so will the great *I AM's* Only Begotten Son be killed on a Roman Cross. His blood is shed so that we could escape the rejection of God, just as Moses did when his firstborn son's blood covered his feet. It is our only hope.

Peter Tchaikovsky was right: "None but the lonely can feel my anguish." The rejected Christ knows the loneliness of my rejection—rejected by God for my sins, rejected by others for my weaknesses, and rejected by myself for the secret sins I carry. The anguish of all that was more than Tchaikovsky (or any of us, for that matter) could handle. But Christ was forsaken by his Father so that we would be accepted; he was rejected by the world that we might be redeemed from the world. Indeed, You never stand alone when you stand with God—and his Son.