Lesson: Exodus 5:1-9; Time of Action: 1445 B.C.; Place of Action: Egypt

Golden Text: “And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness” (Exodus 5:1).

I. INTRODUCTION. At some time or another, we all have felt it. Some of us have even verbalized it. We have found ourselves in a place of total confusion. It seems that no one has a clue as to who is in charge. Then someone, maybe even you, will shout out “Who is in charge?” Our lesson this week asks this very type of question. God had told Moses and his spokesperson Aaron (see Exodus 4:14-16), to go and demand the release of the Israelites from Pharaoh. The stage was now set for both Moses and Pharaoh to learn who was really in charge.

II. LESSON BACKGROUND. In an effort to diminish the Hebrew population in Egypt, the Egyptian pharaoh commanded the midwives to kill all baby boys at birth. However, they refused to do this because they feared God (see Exodus 1:15-21). During this difficult time, Moses was
born. In an effort to protect him from Pharaoh’s murderous plan (see Exodus 1:22), his parents hid him for three months. When they couldn’t hide him any longer, Moses was placed in a waterproof basket and hidden among the reeds along the Nile River (see Exodus 2:1-4). It was here that little Moses was found by Pharaoh’s daughter and then raised as her adopted son. He enjoyed all the benefits of the palace (see Acts 7:22). Moses could have remained in Pharaoh’s court and possibly even ascended to the throne one day. But all that changed when he witnessed how cruelly his people were being treated and he chose to identify with his own oppressed people (see Hebrews 11:24-25). He even killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. This incident was made known to Pharaoh, who sought to have Moses killed; so he ran from Egypt and found refuge with the Midianites (see Exodus 2:11-15). In the land of Midian, Moses married the priest’s daughter Zipporah, raised a family, and became a shepherd (see Exodus 2:16-22). Exodus chapter 2 ends with the children of Israel crying out to the Lord because of their bondage and God heard their cries and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Exodus 2:23-25). Chapter 3 finds Moses tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law on the west side of the desert near Mount Horeb (see Exodus 3:1) where he had the burning bush experience during which God identified Himself to Moses and told him that He had come to deliver His people from the Egyptians (see Exodus 3:1-8). Then the Lord told Moses that He was sending him to Pharaoh to bring His people out and that He would be with Moses throughout (see Exodus 3:9-12). In response to Moses’ question regarding who should he say was sending him, the Lord said “I AM THAT I AM hath sent you.” The Lord then advised Moses to
consult with the Jewish elders and tell them what He said and they were to accompany Moses to Pharaoh and request that he let the Israelites journey three days into the wilderness to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. But God also told Moses that Pharaoh would refuse that request causing the Lord to perform wonders that would force Pharaoh to let His people go along with many gifts (see Exodus 3:13-22). Then Moses presented two reasons why he was not the man for the job. The first objection was that the people would not believe him (see Exodus 4:1-9). The second objection was his inability to speak well (see Exodus 4:10-17); but in each instance the Lord had an answer that negated Moses’ objections. After this meeting with the Lord, Moses returned to Midian and to Jethro and asked that he be allowed to return to Egypt and check on the conditions of his Hebrew brethren (see Exodus 4:18). While in Midian, the Lord spoke to Moses again and told him that it was safe to return to Egypt because those who wanted to kill him were all dead. So Moses took his family, and under God’s direction, he headed back to Egypt (see Exodus 4:18-26). As Moses headed back to Egypt, God spoke to Aaron, Moses’ brother and told him to meet Moses in the wilderness where Moses shared everything that the Lord had told him, and they then shared those things with the elders and the people who in turn worshipped the Lord (see Exodus 4:27-31). Our lesson begins with chapter 5.

**III. MOSES’ REASONABLE REQUEST (Exodus 5:1-3)**
A. The first command (Exodus 5:1). Our first verse says “And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.” The words “And afterward” refer back to Exodus 4:29-31 where Moses convinced the elders and the people of Israel of his divine commission and enabling. It was after this that “Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel.” Notice that “Aaron” and “Moses” came before “Pharaoh” as representatives of “the Lord God of Israel.” This is important because God identifying Himself with the people “of Israel” helps to prevent anyone from confusing Him with any of the false gods of other ancient nations and tribes. It especially distinguishes the Lord from any of the false gods of the Egyptians. The Hebrew word translated “Lord” is Yahweh (Jehovah) and is the personal name of God as the One who keeps His covenants and does everything He says He will do. The Hebrew word translated “God” is Elohim and emphasizes God’s power. As “the Lord God of Israel,” He confirms His covenant ties with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Exodus 2:24) and had chosen the children “of Israel” (see Exodus 4:31) as His own people (see Deuteronomy 7:6-8). They are just beginning to be formed into a people when God is called their God. Even though “Aaron” and “Moses” had a message for Pharaoh, it didn’t come from them. They were merely the instruments God had chosen for this task; they were the Lord’s spokesmen. God’s spokesmen then and now merely echo His message; we are not the source of the message. Therefore, it was extremely important that “Pharaoh” knew right from the start who he
was really dealing with: “the Lord God of Israel.” The message that “Aaron” and “Moses” were required to give to “Pharaoh” was “Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.” This was not a request, it was a command. God through “Moses” commanded “Pharaoh” to allow the Israelites to “hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.” Back when God first commissioned Moses, He instructed him to demand that the people be released to journey three days into the wilderness to hold a feast for Him (see Exodus 3:18). This demand was just and right because they were God’s people, whom He claimed and therefore service was due to Him. The “Lord God of Israel” said to let His people, those lowly Hebrew slaves, go out to the desert to celebrate a festival in His honor. Indeed, Moses was starting off small. All he was asking for was a few days off from work so that the people could worship their “God.” It would be easier for “Pharaoh” to agree to this. But even this modest request from “Moses” would reveal the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart—the utter rejection of “the Lord God.” Note: Of course God knew that “Pharaoh” would not let the Israelites leave Egypt even for a little over three days (see Exodus 3:18-19). Therefore, plagues would be necessary to help change his mind. Through the plagues, God would reveal Himself and His power to the Egyptians (see Exodus 3:20). As the Lord declared, “I will get me honour upon Pharaoh” (see Exodus 14:17). The king of Egypt would be forced to acknowledge God just as every man and woman will one day acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (see Philippians 2:10-11).
B. Pharaoh’s refusal (Exodus 5:2). This verse says “And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.” Pharaoh’s response to God’s command set the stage for confrontation. He asked, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go?” He was not claiming complete ignorance of God. Instead, he was refusing to submit to God. Whether they will admit it or not, people know that there is a God because of the Creation (see Romans 1:18-20). The issue has never been knowledge, but obedience. As far as Pharaoh was concerned, kings gave orders; they didn’t obey them, especially when the orders came from the spokesmen of slaves. So “Pharaoh” then said, “I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.” The word “know” here means “to have experienced something or someone.” Pharaoh’s words “I know not the Lord” were certainly true. Those who don’t “know” God today, feel no need to obey Him either. But those who love God, obey Him (see John 14:15: 15:10; I John 5:3). Claiming not to know “the Lord,” the Egyptian king declared “neither will I let Israel go.” His stubbornness in this regard would soon lead to the devastating plagues visited upon the land and the death of his firstborn (see Exodus 4:23). Note: Jesus defined eternal life in His high priestly prayer when He said that eternal life is knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ who God has sent (see John 17:3). Not to know God is not to have eternal life. The greatest ignorance in our world is ignorance of God and His provision for man’s sin, Jesus Christ. Not knowing the Lord cannot be excused. Claiming ignorance concerning God’s reality is a cop-
out, because God reveals Himself to those who willingly submit to His teachings (see John 7:17). Pharaoh’s question, “Who is the Lord” was a challenge to God’s deity and His Person and it would be answered swiftly.

C. The second command (Exodus 5:3). This verse says “And they said, The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days’ journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God; lest he fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.” In response to Pharaoh’s harsh refusal, and in obedience to God’s command (see Exodus 3:18), Moses and Aaron did what God required. This time they referred to God as “The God of the Hebrews,” which is used several times in the interchange between Moses and Pharaoh (see Exodus 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3). It appears that Pharaoh could relate to this description for Israel’s God since most groups of people had a national or primary god. At this point in history, the word “Hebrews” was a common designation for Abraham’s descendants. Of course they were also known as the children of Israel (see Exodus 1:9), or simply Israel (see Exodus 4:22). Moses and Aaron repeated to Pharaoh what God had commanded them to say: “The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days’ journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God.” In this conversation, they had already asked Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go to have a feast unto the Lord in the wilderness (see verse 1). With the words “we pray thee” they were asking Pharaoh for permission to be gone longer than three days. This was because God required them to go to a unidentified place in the desert that would take them
three days to reach. There they would “sacrifice unto the Lord our God.” The Hebrew word translated “sacrifice” is usually used in connection with animal sacrifices. God wanted His people to have a religious observance that involved animal “sacrifice.” **Note:** Even though God had not yet given Israel instructions about specific feasts to celebrate, the offering of animal sacrifices as a way to worship God went back as far as Noah (see Genesis 8:20). After their undetermined time of worship in the wilderness, Moses implied that the people would return to Egypt. Of course, God knew that Pharaoh would not allow the Israelites to leave in the first place (see Exodus 3:18-19). Then Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh why it was seriously necessary for the Israelites to leave Egypt for this feast. They said “lest he (God) fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.” In other words, if the people didn’t obey God’s command for a feast in His honour they would be inviting His judgment upon themselves. The term “pestilence” refers to plagues. This was also a veiled threat to Pharaoh since he and the Egyptians would later suffer in this way. **Note:** Some people have wondered why Moses and Aaron at God’s instruction requested only a three day journey into the wilderness at this time instead of complete liberation. Was this a ruse on their part? Although some have thought it was, it seems more likely that God wanted Pharaoh first to be given a request that would be unquestionably reasonable to grant. When he refused even this request, it would show Pharaoh’s cruel obstinacy that God’s people had to deal with.
IV. PHARAOH’S RUDE RESPONSE (Exodus 5:4-9)

A. Israel accused of laziness (Exodus 5:4-5).

1. (vs. 4). This verse says “And the king of Egypt said unto them, Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, let the people from their works? get you unto your burdens.” Pharaoh chose to interpret the request from “Moses and Aaron” as a sign of laziness; as just an excuse for the Israelites to avoid work. So “the king of Egypt said unto them, Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, let the people from their works?” He was asking these spokesmen for God why were they trying to take the people away from their labors? As a result, Pharaoh told “Moses and Aaron” to “get you unto your burdens.” He demanded that the people get back to work and forget about having any time off for worship in the wilderness. Pharaoh was including “Moses and Aaron” when he said “get you unto your burdens.” Since they were also Israelites, and whether God had distinguished them from the rest of the Hebrew slaves or not made no difference to Pharaoh; he expected them to get to work as well. As far as Pharaoh was concerned, “Moses and Aaron” must share in the common slavery of their nation. Unlike the pharaoh ruling at the time of Moses’ birth, who wanted to exterminate the Israelites (see Exodus 1:15-16, 22), this “king of Egypt” saw Israel as an important workforce worth holding on to.

2. (vs. 5). This verse says, “And Pharaoh said,
Behold, the people of the land now are many, and ye make them rest from their burdens.” In addition to refusing to hear God’s command, “Pharaoh” also refused to acknowledge that Israel belonged to God. He referred to the Israelites as “the people of the land” with the word “land” referring to Egypt. “Pharaoh” was actually claiming these Hebrew slaves as belonging to Egypt and not the “Lord God of Israel” (see vs. 1). “Pharaoh” went on to tell Moses and Aaron that the Hebrews “now are many, and ye make them rest from their burdens.” Again, the king of Egypt was accusing Moses and Aaron of wasting time and keeping the Hebrew slaves from doing their work. **Note: While slavery was part of the social life in ancient times, it cannot be justified on biblical grounds. Regulations in the Mosaic Law called for humane treatment for slaves. The Law also made provisions for Hebrew slaves to be freed after six years of servitude (see Exodus 21:2).**

B. Israel made to languish (Exodus 5:6-9).

1. (vs. 6). This verse says “And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying...” Unmoved by the request for time away for worship, “Pharaoh” immediately instructed the “taskmasters” to make the Hebrews’ work even more difficult as we shall see in the next verse. On the “same day” that he had the conversation with Moses and Aaron, “Pharaoh commanded...the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying...” The “taskmasters” were Egyptian slave drivers and “their officers” were
foremen who were Hebrews themselves (see Exodus 5:14). They were slaves in charge of their fellow slaves. Now they were going to have to drive their own people harder.

2. (vs. 7). This verse says “Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves.” Instead of just saying no, Pharaoh responded just like King Solomon’s son Rehoboam would later respond when he was challenged to ease the burdens on his own Hebrew people (see I Kings 12:9-14). Like Pharaoh, Rehoboam would also increase the Israelites’ burdens. Now after his conversation with Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters and the foremen saying “Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves.” Up to this point “straw” had been provided to the Hebrew workforce for making bricks. But now, the Hebrews were going to have to “gather straw” for themselves. Egyptian bricks were often made from the mud in the Nile River and needed “straw” to keep them from falling apart. From that point on, the Israelites were going to have to rummage the countryside looking for any stubble and “straw” they could find (see Exodus 5:12). But that was just the beginning of how hard Pharaoh would make the lives of the Hebrews. The fact that Pharaoh made this command “the same day” (see verse 6) that Moses and Aaron made the request, indicates that he had no mercy at all for these slaves.

3. (vs. 8). This verse says “And the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay
upon them; ye shall not diminish ought thereof: for they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God.” Adding to the difficulty of getting their own straw for bricks, Pharaoh also commanded the taskmasters that “the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay upon them; ye shall not diminish ought thereof.” The word “tale” here means “number. In other words, the taskmasters had to require the Israelites to produce the same number of bricks that they had been making before, and the taskmasters were also to make sure that the number of bricks “shall not diminish” or be reduced at all. The same quota had to be met even though the Israelites had to find their own straw. Then Pharaoh gave the reason why he was making the slaves gather their own straw. He said “for they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God.” Pharaoh was again accusing them of being lazy when he said “for they be idle,” and he implied that having too much time on their hands was the reason why they were crying out to him to “Let us go and sacrifice to our God.” The king of Egypt reasoned that if the Hebrew slaves were kept busy looking for straw and making bricks, they wouldn’t have time to think about worshiping their “God.”

4. (vs. 9). Our final verse says “Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein; and let them not regard vain words.” To further take the minds of the Israelites off worshiping their God, Pharaoh also told the taskmasters to “Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein.” In other words, the taskmasters were commanded to make the
“labour” or hard work heavier on the Hebrews, and let them work hard. Pharaoh believed that added hard labor would cause the Hebrews to “not regard” or pay attention to “vain words.” The term “vain” means “empty” or “worthless.” Pharaoh was calling God’s words as spoken through Moses and Aaron worthless, and characterizing His words as lies. The hardness of Pharaoh’s heart led him to conclude that if the Hebrews worked even harder than usual they wouldn’t have time to pay attention to their God’s lying words. It should be noted that when the expected number of bricks was not being provided by the slaves, the Israelite foremen were beaten (see Exodus 5:14). When they complained to Pharaoh, his response was “Ye are idle (lazy), ye are idle” (see Exodus 5:17). What a hard heart! How’s yours?

V. CONCLUSION. The message for Pharaoh in this week’s lesson was the news that there was an authority besides him who was over the Hebrew people. This God was worthy to be worshiped, and He wanted His people to worship Him in freedom rather than remain in bondage to an earthly ruler. Our lesson revealed that this was a difficult concept for Pharaoh to accept. The same thing often happens when Christians witness about the Lord Jesus Christ to unbelievers. Like Moses and Aaron, we are talking to people who consider themselves as their own god, their own master and lord. To talk to them about Jesus, sin, repentance, and obedience to God is to introduce a higher authority to them which calls for them to give up their own power and give their lives to Jesus. Unfortunately, as with Pharaoh, this is a
message that is usually not accepted the first time it is presented to unbelievers. It may not ever be accepted, but that’s not our problem. That’s between each person and the Lord. Our task, like Moses and Aaron’s is to be the messenger and communicate with a holy boldness. When we do, we must leave the results up to God.