

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Exodus 5 opens the direct confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh that the LORD commanded in 3:18–4:23. Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh with a simple, divinely-authorized demand: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” Pharaoh’s response is immediate, contemptuous, and theological: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.” He dismisses the request as laziness, increases the Israelites’ labor by withholding straw while maintaining the brick quota, and scatters them across Egypt to find their own straw. The foremen, caught between Pharaoh’s impossible demand and their people’s failure to meet it, are beaten. They appeal to Pharaoh, receive no relief, and then turn on Moses and Aaron in bitter accusation: “You have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.” Moses, reeling, turns to the LORD with a complaint that sounds almost like a lament psalm — “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?” — and the chapter closes without resolution, the prayer hanging unanswered until chapter 6.

This Text — Intent:

God is preparing His people — and His servant Moses — for the long, painful, disorienting reality that obedience to God’s call does not produce immediate deliverance. The reader is being schooled in the theology of the *delay*: things got worse before they got better, and this was not a sign that God had miscalculated or abandoned the mission. The intent is to shape faith that can hold its footing when the ground shifts beneath it — faith that runs to God in honest complaint rather than away from God in silent despair, and faith that does not interpret increased suffering as divine abandonment. This chapter is God’s training ground for a people — and a preacher — who will need to trust promises they cannot yet see fulfilled.

Subject Sentence: Obedience to God’s call meets immediate, costly resistance — and the mission does not abort.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to trust that His purposes are not derailed by opposition, suffering, or unanswered prayer — and that honest lament is the right response when circumstances contradict the promise.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Pharaoh’s “hardening” and human responsibility: Exodus 5 precedes the explicit hardening language of later chapters (the LORD hardening Pharaoh’s heart, Exodus 9–10), but Pharaoh’s resistance here is entirely self-generated — “Who is the LORD?” — making this chapter theologically important for establishing that Pharaoh’s opposition is not merely mechanical divine compulsion but a genuine expression of the creature’s autonomous refusal to acknowledge the LORD. The Reformed reading rightly maintains compatibilism throughout Exodus: Pharaoh’s free and culpable rebellion and God’s sovereign purpose are not in competition. Arminian readings tend to cluster the early chapters around Pharaoh’s free resistance and limit the later hardening texts to divine confirmation of what Pharaoh had already chosen. This reading partially acknowledges a real feature of the text — Pharaoh does harden his own heart in several instances — but is unable to account for Paul’s use of Pharaoh in Romans 9:17 (“For this very purpose I have raised you up”) as a premier example of unconditional divine sovereignty. The Reformed reading does not flatten the distinction between Pharaoh’s moral culpability (fully present) and God’s overarching purpose (fully operative), but holds both without dissolving either.

Moses’s complaint as sin or as faithful prayer: A recurring homiletical error treats Moses’s closing lament (vv. 22–23) as a failure of faith to be corrected or minimized. This reading is common in pulpits that are uncomfortable with the lament tradition and prefer a tidier narrative of confident obedience. But the text itself does not rebuke Moses here — God answers the complaint in chapter 6 with a fresh, expanded disclosure of His covenant name and purposes. The lament tradition across the Psalter (Psalms 13, 22, 44, 88) and the prophets (Jeremiah 20) establishes that bringing honest confusion and anguish to God is the *opposite* of faithlessness — it is the act of a person who still believes God is real, present, and obligated by His own promises. The Reformed reading should affirm Moses’s lament as a model of covenantal honesty: not demanding that God answer to Moses, but holding God to what God Himself has said. This is not the lament of unbelief; it is the lament of embattled belief.

The purpose of the delay: Dispensational readings sometimes treat the ten plagues (and the prolonged hardening leading to them) primarily through the lens of prophetic typology — the plagues as foreshadowing end-times judgment on Egypt as a type of the world system. This is not wrong as far as canonical development goes, but it risks reading Exodus 5 primarily as anticipatory scaffolding rather than as its own complete theological claim. The Reformed reading attends first to the narrative-theological claim of the chapter in its own right: the delay and worsening conditions are part of God’s pedagogy for Israel, displaying that salvation belongs entirely to the LORD and not to any human instrument or political negotiation.

The Reformed reading is preferred because it accounts for the full range of the chapter’s own movement — from confident commission to catastrophic setback to honest lament —

without resolving the tension artificially, and because it places the lament within the broader covenantal framework that the text itself sustains.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalm 13** — “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” — establishes the lament form as legitimate covenant speech; Moses’s prayer in vv. 22–23 belongs to this tradition and should be read as faithfully within it, not as a departure from it.
 - **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul’s use of Pharaoh (“For this very purpose I have raised you up, to show my power in you”) grounds the entire Exodus resistance narrative within divine sovereignty and anchors the Reformed reading of Pharaoh’s opposition as God’s purposive theater for displaying His glory.
 - **John 11:1–6, 38–44** — The raising of Lazarus follows a structurally similar delay pattern: Jesus deliberately waits, things get worse (Lazarus dies), the sisters are in anguish (“Lord, if you had been here...”), and the delay becomes the occasion for a greater display of divine power. The pattern of Exodus 5 — worse before better, for the sake of a greater revelation of God — is canonically confirmed here.
 - **Acts 14:22** — “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” — the apostolic summary of the Christian life echoes the Exodus pattern; suffering and opposition on the way to deliverance is the norm, not the exception.
 - **Habakkuk 1:2–4** — Habakkuk’s opening complaint to God (“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?”) is structurally parallel to Moses’s lament in 5:22–23; both establish that prophetic faith cries out to God when circumstances contradict the promise.
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Aim: To equip the reader to hold fast to God’s promises when obedience produces opposition and suffering rather than immediate relief — and to bring honest lament to God rather than abandoning the mission or manufacturing false resolution.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh; deliver the LORD’s demand: “Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the	First direct confrontation. The demand is framed as divine command — “Thus says the LORD.”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	wilderness.”	
2	Pharaoh’s response: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”	The chapter’s theological center: Pharaoh’s ignorance of the LORD is defiant, not merely informational. This sets up the entire plague narrative — Israel will learn who the LORD is, and so will Egypt.
3	Moses and Aaron reframe: “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or sword.”	A more modest restatement — not “the God of all the earth” but “the God of the Hebrews.” The appeal to divine obligation (“lest he fall upon us”) adds urgency.
4–5	Pharaoh accuses Moses and Aaron of distracting the people from their work. Notes the people are already numerous — why multiply their rest?	Pharaoh reframes the theological confrontation as a labor-management problem. This is characteristic of worldly power: it cannot process a divine claim and so reduces it to a political one.
6–9	Pharaoh commands the taskmasters and foremen: no more straw provided; the same brick quota must be maintained. The people are idle and listening to “lying words” — the demand to go sacrifice.	Escalation. The command is economically punishing and designed to destroy any possibility of the people attending to Moses’s message.
10–14	Taskmasters communicate the new orders; the people scatter to find straw; they cannot meet the quota; the Israelite foremen are beaten by the Egyptian taskmasters.	The worsening conditions are immediate, concrete, and painful. The foremen bear the physical cost of the confrontation Moses initiated.
15–19	The Israelite foremen appeal directly to Pharaoh; receive	Pharaoh’s response closes every available avenue of

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	a contemptuous rebuff: “You are idle, you are idle.” The foremen recognize they are in “trouble” — the quota unchanged, the straw gone.	relief. The foremen are trapped between Pharaoh above and their people below.
20–21	The foremen confront Moses and Aaron on leaving Pharaoh’s presence; accuse them: “You have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”	The community’s first open accusation against Moses. This will recur throughout Exodus and Numbers. The messenger is blamed for the message.
22–23	Moses turns to the LORD: “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.”	Moses’s lament. Not addressed to the foremen, not expressed to Aaron — brought directly to the LORD. Three accusatory questions, each pressing God on His own stated purposes.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Demand and the Dismissal — Moses confronts Pharaoh; Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge the LORD
2	6–14	The Escalation — Pharaoh increases the burden; the foremen are beaten
3	15–19	The Closed Door — the foremen’s appeal to Pharaoh produces no relief
4	20–21	The Community’s Accusation — the foremen turn on Moses and Aaron

Division	Verses	Label
5	22–23	The Servant’s Lament — Moses brings his complaint to the LORD

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Applications

1. (Mind/Belief) When obedience to God produces worse circumstances rather than better ones, the correct interpretation is not “I misheard God” or “this mission has failed” — it is “God’s purposes are larger than my ability to see them from here.” Moses had a burning-bush commission, miraculous signs, and direct divine speech — and things still got worse first. The reader who has received God’s clear call but is watching the situation deteriorate needs to reframe the evidence: opposition is not refutation. The absence of immediate deliverance is not the absence of God.

2. (Mind/Belief) Pharaoh’s question — “Who is the LORD?” — is not answered in chapter 5. It is answered across the entire plague narrative, culminating at the Red Sea. This means that God’s response to the world’s defiance of His authority is often slow, large, and conclusive rather than fast, small, and surgical. The reader who is waiting for God to vindicate His name in a particular situation needs to understand that God’s vindication operates on a different timescale and at a different scale than human impatience expects — and that the answer, when it comes, will be unmistakable.

3. (Affections/Worship) The community accused Moses of making them “stink” before Pharaoh — and from a purely pragmatic standpoint, they were not wrong. The messenger of God’s word is regularly the one blamed when the message produces resistance. Those who carry God’s word into resistant environments — workplaces, families, communities — need to be emotionally and spiritually prepared for the accusation that they have made things worse. The comfort here is not that this accusation is always false (it may be partially true in the short run) but that the mission’s legitimacy does not depend on the community’s approval. Moses did not abandon the mission when they turned on him. He took the accusation to God.

4. (Affections/Worship) Moses’s lament in verses 22–23 is a model of how to bring anguish and confusion to God rather than away from God. He did not resign his commission, retreat to Midian, or manufacture a theological explanation for why

everything was actually fine. He went to God with precisely the contradiction he was experiencing: “You said X; X has not happened; in fact, the opposite has happened — why?” This is the posture of faith under pressure, not the posture of unbelief. The reader who is holding a genuine promise of God against genuinely contrary circumstances is invited to imitate Moses here — not to suppress the anguish but to bring it directly and honestly to the one who made the promise.

5. (Will/Behavior) Moses’s confrontation with Pharaoh in verse 1 is a concrete act of obedience before any sign of success was visible — and the chapter closes with that obedience having produced nothing yet except suffering. The reader is called to identify the specific act of obedience they are deferring because the outcome is not yet visible — the hard conversation, the countercultural stand, the costly commitment — and to take it, trusting that God’s purposes do not require visible short-term confirmation. Obedience is not validated by immediate outcomes. Moses went. Go.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 5 teaches that God’s redemptive purposes advance through conflict, not around it — and that the conflict is not incidental to the plan but part of it. Pharaoh’s defiance is not a complication God must manage; it is the theater in which God will display His incomparable power and the total inadequacy of every rival authority that presumes to challenge Him. The chapter also establishes a critical feature of God’s character: He is not frightened by honest complaint. Moses’s lament does not produce divine rebuke — it produces, in chapter 6, a fresh and fuller disclosure of who God is and what He has promised. God is not fragile before the prayers of His servants in anguish. He is the covenant LORD who takes seriously both His promises and the suffering of those who hold Him to them.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 5 is a premier text for the Reformed insistence that God’s sovereignty encompasses not only deliverance but the conditions of suffering that precede it — and that this sovereignty is not a cold, abstract decree but a purposive plan operating through real human pain toward a glorious end. The delay and the worsening are not God’s absence; they are His appointment. This is structurally identical to the Reformed understanding of sanctification and trial (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4): the pressure is the process, not the obstacle to the process. Moses’s lament also models the Reformed covenantal understanding of prayer — not presenting God with new information or attempting to change His mind, but holding God to His own stated covenant purposes with honest, direct speech. Reformed theology at its best produces people who can lament without losing faith, suffer without losing mission, and cry out to God without mistaking His silence for His absence.

Main Takeaway

Things got worse before they got better — and that was not God losing control. It was God setting the stage. When obedience to His call produces suffering instead of relief, bring the contradiction honestly to the LORD who gave the call, and keep going. The mission is not invalidated by opposition; it is on precisely the trajectory God intends.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Moses's lament as a failure of faith to be corrected.** This is perhaps the most common mishandling of the chapter. Verses 22–23 are not Moses at his worst; they are Moses at a crucial moment of spiritual integrity — bringing his crisis to God rather than walking away from God. Preachers who rush past the lament or treat it as a parenthetical embarrassment rob their congregations of the permission and pattern to bring their own anguish honestly before the LORD. The lament tradition is not a footnote; it is a gift.
- **Using the chapter primarily as a set-up for the plague narrative rather than preaching its own complete claim.** There is a real temptation to treat Exodus 5 as merely anticipatory — “just wait until the plagues” — and thereby fail to preach what the chapter itself claims: that God's people must learn to trust His purposes through the experience of things getting worse before they get better. The chapter has its own complete theological claim and should not be reduced to a prelude.
- **Moralistic application: “be bold like Moses.”** Moses's boldness in verse 1 is real and worth noting, but the chapter's claim is not “be bold in your witness.” The chapter's claim is about what happens after bold obedience produces catastrophic results — and whether God's purposes survive that catastrophe. Reducing the chapter to a call for courage misses the harder and more important teaching about trusting the covenant LORD through the suffering obedience produces.
- **Skipping over the foremen's accusation (vv. 20–21) without applying it.** The accusation — “you have made us stink” — is a concrete pastoral reality for anyone carrying God's word into resistant environments. Pastors, missionaries, and faithful witnesses in hostile workplaces or families will recognize this dynamic immediately. The text addresses it directly and deserves direct application: the messenger of God will sometimes be blamed by the very people he is seeking to serve, and this does not invalidate the mission.
- **Implying that eventual deliverance retroactively eliminates the reality of the suffering in chapter 5.** “It all worked out in the end” is both theologically true (Exodus 14–15) and pastorally destructive as a response to present suffering. The

foremen were beaten. Moses was shaken. These are real wounds, not merely temporary plot complications. Good preaching of this chapter honors the suffering on its own terms before pointing to the deliverance that vindicates it.

- **Failing to connect Pharaoh’s “Who is the LORD?” to the theological engine of the entire Exodus narrative.** This question is the question Exodus is written to answer. Missing it in chapter 5 means missing the interpretive key to everything that follows. Even if this chapter is preached in isolation, the preacher should note that this question — voiced in contempt — will receive a comprehensive, devastating, unmistakable answer, and that the same God who answered it then is the same God whose authority is still being contested today.