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## God in the Burning Bush

### The Call of Moses

Exodus 3:1-4:17

#### Introduction

Forty years had passed since Moses came to the wilderness, met Reuel, and married Zipporah. He was at peace with himself. He had done a good job and was trusted with the management of the herd of sheep belonging to his father-in-law. The incident that led to his abrupt departure had faded as a distant memory, a ghost of his past life. While he lived "content" with his new family and secure in his position, 2:21-22, the Hebrews in Egypt were reeling under the weight of the oppression that continued and increased even after a new Pharaoh was inaugurated in Egypt. The cries of the Hebrews came before God, and He remembered His promise to Abraham that they would be released from bondage and exit the land with just payment for their servitude. The discomfort of the Hebrews was about to break into the calm and contentment of Moses' world.

#### An Unexpected Meeting, 3:1-8.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law as he had done for forty years. We do not know much about those years. What we do know is that Moses married Zipporah and that she bore him a son named Gershom. Jethro was a priest of Midian. The Midianites were of the same family line as Abraham and were worshippers of Yahweh. According to Genesis 25:1-4, Midian was one of six sons born to Abraham by Keturah after the death of Sarah.

The nature of Moses' relationship with God during these years could only be speculation. Since we know from our previous lesson that the wilderness often was a school for leadership, we can only surmise that Moses had much time to reflect on God and on what role Yahweh might have for him in the future, if any. Even though he took up the cause of a fellow Hebrew and took matters into his own hands, he, in fact, was a murderer who escaped Egypt with his life alone. Like David after him, perhaps it was during these years that he wrote the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm. If you look at Psalm 90:1-17 you can see how his concern for the majesty of Yahweh and the frailty of human life may have come to him in the crucible of his training in the desert. It would be safe to imagine that the last thing he would have expected was a face-to-face encounter with Yahweh.

**Verses 1-3.** "Now Moses . . ." the statement that opens this verse is an emphatic statement. Normally in Hebrew the verb appears first and the noun follows. But in

this sentence the noun, *Moses*, appears first. This placement of words in the text reveals that following the presentation of the predicament of the Hebrews in chapters 1 and 2, "Now *Moses* . . ." identified *Moses* as the key to the solution.

*Moses* was keeping the flock of his father-in-law and was on the "back side" of the desert. The "back side" would have been on the west. The front would always be facing east. As he came near Mount Horeb, which became known as the mountain of God, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him there. The Angel of the Lord appears repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. He often speaks in first person as if He were God, as He does here in Exodus at the burning bush. He often comes with a revelation or message from God. He also appears as a protector, defender, comforter, guide, intercessor, commissioner, confirmer, and He even dispenses judgment. He is often identified as the pre-incarnate manifestation of Jesus who is part of the triune nature of God (see Gen 18:1-33; Josh 5:13-15; Judg 13:1-25; Isa 6:3; 9:6; 40:3; Matt 3:3; John 1:1-2; 12:36-41; Heb 1:8-9). It is significant that the Angel of the Lord no longer appears after the birth of Jesus.

So, the Angel of the Lord appeared in a flaming fire in the middle of a bush. In the dry desert, a bush would be incendiary and burn very quickly. But this bush continued to burn and miraculously, it was not consumed, v. 2. *Moses* saw the bush and noted that the flame did not consume it. He turned aside to look at this amazing bush, v. 3.

**Verses 4 -8.** When God saw that indeed He had *Moses*' attention, He called his name, "*Moses, Moses!*" And *Moses* responded with "Here I am." *Moses* was immediately warned to come no farther and to pull off his sandals because, "the place where you stand, is holy ground," v. 5. The ground was hallowed by the presence of God in that place. God made no attempt to explain the phenomenon of the burning bush, but immediately turns to the purpose for this surprising meeting. God identified Himself as ". . . the God of your father - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," v. 6. *Moses* immediately hid his face because he knew that to look upon God was certain death. God continued, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows," v. 7.

God's purpose therefore was to "deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians," and also to "bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey." God identifies the land as "the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites," v. 8.

**Lessons:** This encounter revealed five lessons about God to *Moses* and to us.

1. Yahweh is the God of the individual. He called Moses by name, v. 4, and warned him to proceed no further because He was in the presence of God's holiness, v. 5. Removal of his sandals was a sign of respect and honor toward God. God sometimes gives us an important assignment in a dramatic way in order to communicate His plan and His purposes to the called out, without question or misunderstanding.
2. Yahweh is the God of the past as well as the future. He identified Himself to Moses as the God of Moses' father, Amram, and also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his forefathers, v. 6. This tags past promises as evidence that God can supply whatever Moses needs to accomplish his task. It reminds us that the God who has been faithful in the past is still at work in the present and the future.
3. Yahweh is the God who hears the prayers of His people. He knows all about the pain, suffering, and sorrows of the Hebrews, v. 7. The call of a leader would be a great encouragement to those who were struggling with the hardships inflicted on them.
4. Yahweh is the God of action. He not only knows about their suffering, He has personally come down from heaven to "deliver" them from their bondage and suffering, v. 8. God's compassion results in action! He does more than show sympathy; He came in the person of Christ to experience pain and suffering firsthand. He is not just sympathetic; He is empathetic.
5. Yahweh is the God who never changes. This is the revelation reflected in Psalm 90:1-17, especially verses 1-6. As we shall see in Exodus 3:14, He is the God who is eternally the same. He is not in "process" of becoming as the "open theists" claim. He is the eternal and unchanging God of creation, see Mal 3:6-7; Numb 23:19; John 8:56-59.

These insights reveal a God of love and mercy who is faithful and true. He is in touch with the harsh realities of pain and suffering of His people and He is responsive to their situation. What Moses learned at the burning bush confirmed everything he knew about God. God, who was calling him, was willing and able to accomplish a great deliverance through Moses as His chosen leader and messenger.

#### **An Unexpected Assignment, 3:9-10.**

Just as Moses could not anticipate the divine encounter with God at the burning bush, he could not see the next thing God was about to reveal to him. Every day since he had fled for his life, he thought about the plight of His people and perhaps even prayed for God to send a deliverer. But it is clear he was not ready to hear the next words from God.

**Verses 9-10.** God repeated to Moses, "I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them," v. 9. "Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt," v. 10. Concern

for the plight of others, even our friends and loved ones, is commendable. To offer our sympathy and our prayers for them is a wonderful gesture. But now, the call for personal involvement by God was laid out before him. As it was with Moses, so all too often it is with us. It is easy to declare the highest moral purposes of God, but it is never easy to be an instrument by which God will bring those purposes to pass in the lives of others. It is an act of grace when God uses a person. There is none righteous, not one, Ps 14:1-3; Rom 3:10-11. No one ever adequately is qualified to be called by God for a crucial assignment. The main qualification is, in fact, the call itself. God chooses whomever He wills and promises to be with them. Note that in Moses' first encounter with God, He promised that He would be with Moses, Exod 3:12, and that is all the qualification anyone needs.

### **Moses, the Consummate Excuse Maker, 3:11-4:17.**

The fine art of excuse making is not a modern talent. We can see evidence of it in the response to sin in the Garden of Eden in Gen 3:9-24. Moses was very adept in the art of convincingly presenting his case as to why he should not be the one chosen to return to Egypt and lead the people from captivity. You will note that none of the five excuses that Moses gave to God have been retired from use in our attempt to avoid responsibilities to which God may call us. Let us prayerfully consider Moses' five excuses.

1. I am not qualified for this assignment, 3:11-12. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh. . . ." Moses knew all too well the breadth and height and depth of the assignment God was giving to him. His first reaction was natural. He could not believe that he was qualified or capable of handling such a daunting task. Yet, God never makes a mistake when He chooses a leader. "Who am I" indeed! Who better to confront Pharaoh than one who understood the mind of the Egyptians? Who better than one who grew up in the court of the king and knew the customs and qualifications for making such a petition? Who better than one who had the education and training that would equip him to stand before the ruler of Egypt? Who better than one who for forty years had explored every nook and cranny of the backside of the desert? Who better than one who, of necessity, had learned how to live in the desert and survive? Who better than Moses? Who? Nobody, that's who!

**Lesson:** Each of God's answers to Moses is a lesson for us!

**God's Answer.** It is very easy to support your local church, the cause of Christ, even world missions endeavors, but never consider personal involvement. Who am I that I should GO? Who? It is easy to give lip service to the cause of carrying the Gospel; it is another thing to go forth as a witness. God had a twofold answer for Moses and for us. First, God said, "Certainly I will be with you." Second, even though he did not ask for a sign, God promised, "And this shall be a sign to you that **I have sent you:** When

you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain," v. 12. It is an amazing fact that when God wants to impact the world, He does not do so with a committee, or a program, or a gimmick, but with a person. God so loved the world that He did not develop a program, or send a committee, or contrive a gimmick, but He sent His only begotten Son. He also has chosen human instruments to accomplish great purposes.

2. I wouldn't know what to say, 3:13-22. Does this sound familiar? How many times have you said, "Even if I were to accept the challenge, I would not know what to say in this situation." Moses said, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" v. 13. This issue is not a matter of not knowing God's name *per se*. Some incorrectly suggest that Moses lived in a polytheistic world, and he wanted to be sure which one of the gods he was representing, see Doug K. Stuart, *Exodus*, in *The New American Commentary*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006, p. 120. But this explanation fails on the grounds that it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; therefore there was only one correct answer. His correct personal name is Yahweh.

**Lesson:** When God calls you, He is sufficient to enable you to do the work!  
**God's Answer.** God's personal name is revealed in the answer He gave to Moses in verse 14. The answer was, "I AM WHO I AM." So He said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM' has sent me to you." The name of God is Y-H-W-H and it is never given with the vowel points. So the exact sound of the name is uncertain. The normal vowel pattern for these consonants would be "a" and "e" probably pronounced Yah - Way. This was not a new revelation since the name appears to Seth in Gen 4:26; to Noah in 9:26; to Abraham in 12:28; to Isaac in 26:25; to Jacob in 28:16; and to Laban in 30:27. The significance of the name here in Exodus 3:14 is the meaning God gave to it. The best translation of the phrase in answer to Moses' question is "I WILL CONTINUE TO BE THAT WHICH I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN," v. 14. Tell the people "I AM WHO I AM" has sent me. This is not only the name Yahweh; it is the meaning and significance of the name.

This revelation of the personal name of God as Yahweh is of supreme significance. Sharing one's personal name in the Ancient Near East carried with it an expression of confidence in the person to whom it was revealed. But what did this mystical and enigmatic declaration mean? Some say it is a statement of God's eternal nature. This seems unlikely since the eternal nature of God was never in question in the Hebrew mind. Hebrew thought is concrete rather than abstract, so communication of the eternity by such a

phrase would be unintelligible to the Hebrews. Also, the use of an abstraction at this time is out of context for the needs of the people who were in bondage in Egypt.

So, again, what does it mean? The context of this revelation calls for a two-directional point of view. The phrase, "I WILL CONTINUE TO BE THAT WHICH I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN," is a wonderful affirmation of a memorial name for God. Yahweh is the God who has been, now is, and always will be truth, righteousness, faithfulness, redemption, loving, caring, delivering, helping, healing, working, etc. and etc. Yahweh is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and He blessed them, as He will bless all those who follow them, v. 15. He said to Moses, "As I was with them, I will be with you," v. 12.

Here is the message Moses was given. Yahweh said, "I AM THE MESSAGE!" Whatever you need, God says, "I AM!" the answer to that need. Remember in John's Gospel he presents Jesus in this way. We hear Jesus saying, "Are you hungry? I am the bread of life!" John 6:35. "Are you thirsty? I am the water of life!" John 4:14. When you can't see your way, He says, "I am the light of the world!" John 8:12. When you are lost, He says, "I am the Good Shepherd!" John 10:10. When you need entrance, He says, "I am the door!" John 10:9. When you lie cold in the grave, He says, "I am the resurrection and the life," John 11:25. Whatever you need, Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am," and He is able to meet whatever your need is because He is the God Who is able.

**Verses 16-22.** So here was Moses' marching order. "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, appeared to me, saying, 'I have surely visited you and seen what is done to you in Egypt, and I have said I will bring you out . . .'" vv. 16-17. God reaffirms the promise announced to Moses in 3:8 about the land and its fruitfulness. God further says that when Moses has done this, the people will follow him, v. 18. God instructs Moses to tell the king of Egypt to let them go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice and worship Yahweh, v. 18. God revealed that the king would not let them go. God promised, "I will strike Egypt with all my miracles . . . and after that he will let you go," vv. 19-20. Finally, God promised He would give the Hebrews favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Everyone was to ask their Egyptian neighbors for articles of silver, gold, and clothing, and "you shall plunder the Egyptians," vv. 20-22. This was to be just payment for their service to Egypt. God promised they would receive a miraculous and bountiful supply, and they did!

**Lesson:** When God calls a person, He already has a great purpose in mind.

God revealed to Moses and to us that being called does not necessarily mean instant success or success without struggle. Jesus had to go to the cross to finish His work. The purposes of God are great but not without difficulty. God often allows the struggles to test our resolve and to strengthen our commitment. Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of the limits of his faith, Gen 22:1-19.

3. By what authority shall I speak? 4:1-9. An excuse of any kind is an attempt to avoid responsibility, and when it is related to doing God's work, it is all the more reprehensible. There is a sense in which we can identify with Moses' third excuse. Remember that he had been gone for forty years. He left as a fugitive from justice after committing murder. There would have been many people who had heard only bad things about him and perhaps many others who had never heard of him at all. One can understandably sense Moses' reluctance to show up and announce that he was their long lost spiritual leader. It does seem to be a stretch. Put yourself in his place. You are a fugitive from justice and you turn up after a forty-year absence to announce that God has chosen you to be the messianic leader calling on the nation to follow you. By the way, you have no map, no plan, no visible resources, and no physical evidence of your call from God. You announce that you want everyone to follow you to you know not where. So Moses said, "Suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you,'" v. 1. What would he do then?

**Verse 1.** For Moses, God's answer was to allow him to be used as a harbinger of God's message and determination to secure the release of His people from bondage in Egypt. God wanted to demonstrate both to Moses and the people that indeed He had the power sufficient to perform the task He assigned to Moses. When God gives His power, as He did with Jesus, it was a demonstration of His authority, see Matt 28:18-20. God chose signs that were very significant in that they struck the very heart of Egyptian life, worship, theology, government, and culture.

**Verses 2-5.** For the first sign, God asked a question. "What is that in your hand?" Moses said, "A rod." This doubtless was the shepherd's staff that Moses used to tend the sheep of Jethro. God answered, "Cast it on the ground." To Moses' astonishment the rod turned into a serpent, and Moses retreated in fear. This was a common slight-of-hand trick that the magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate, except that their rods were swallowed up by God's rod, see Exod 7:11-13. We will discuss the implications for Egyptian theology when we get to chapter 7. Needless to say, the miracles Moses performed were not slight-of-hand but by the power of God.

They struck at the heart of Egyptian worship and the pantheon of the gods of Egypt.

**Verses 6-8.** As a second sign, God said to Moses, "Put your hand in your bosom," that is, inside his garment. Moses did so and then at God's instruction took it out, and it was full of leprosy. Leprosy was considered to be a judgment from God for sin. God then said, "Put your hand in your bosom again," v. 7. He did so and his hand was healed of the leprosy. Such healing was a miracle and evidence of God's blessing. So God added, "If they do not believe you, nor heed the message of the first sign," v. 8, then they might believe in the message of the second sign.

**Verse 9.** God offered a third sign. He said, "And it shall be, if they do not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, then you shall take water from the river and pour it on the dry land," v. 9a. God told Moses that when he poured out the water on dry land, it would become blood.

God's answer to Moses' third objection was to give Moses the ability to perform the miraculous feat of turning water from the Nile River into blood. The Nile was a sacred river associated with worship and theology. It also was the source of life and sustenance for Egypt. The river was the only source for irrigation of the crops for Egyptian farmers. To lose it was to pronounce the commercial, economic, and physical death of the land. But Moses was not finished in presenting his case for not accepting God's assignment.

**Lesson:** When we are fully committed, God will provide the necessary confirmation of His call and assignment. Be aware! When God gives a dramatic display of His power and purpose with us, it leaves us without excuse to accomplish His will.

**God's Answer.** Moses' third objection does get a very impressive response from God. He gave Moses three signs that were to be miraculous, confirming evidence of his divine authority. Whenever God sends miracles on demand, it always is as a sign to serve as the authentication of His message and/or His messenger. There are three places in Scripture where there are clusters of miracles, each of which served this authenticating purpose. The first of these clusters of miracles are associated with Moses. The second cluster of miracles may be found in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, 1 Kgs 17:1 to 2 Kgs 7:20. The third cluster of miracles is associated with the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. Each of these clusters of miracles is given as signs for authentication of the ministry of God's messengers.

4. Moses: "I have no ability as a speaker," 4:10-12. Moses did not easily give in to God's supernaturally revealed plan for his life. He continued with another excuse by complaining that he was not an "eloquent" speaker, literally "a man of words." He then adds a unique Semitic phrase literally, "not since yesterday, not since the third day," which means "not now, nor ever before," has he been a man of words, 10. He strongly implies that not even the miraculous encounter with God at the burning bush had remedied this problem. Therefore, it was a backhanded reproach aimed at God. Then he completed his complaint with the declaration that he was "slow of speech and slow of tongue." Some have erroneously claimed that he evidently had a speech impediment of some kind. Walter Kaiser says that any legitimacy to this claim could only be related to some limitations in his command of Hebrew and Egyptian to have the vocabulary necessary to convince the Hebrews to leave and Pharaoh to let them go, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Exodus* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, p. 328.

**Lesson:** God is able to overcome our deficiencies. Jonathan Edwards was sickly and weak. His unpleasant voice was thin, his delivery monotone, his gestures passive, and he read from a manuscript. Yet, when he presented his great sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," (see his outline attached), a great revival resulted as people committed their lives to God, see Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Volume III*, Waco: Word Books, Publisher, pp. 51-52. Moses' objections are weak, in that God empowers those He calls, regardless of their ability or lack.

**God's Answer:** God's immediate reply was a series of questions that were proverbial and comparable to a wisdom lesson. "Who made man's mouth?" "Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, Yahweh?" v. 11. The absurdity of Moses' fourth objection clearly provoked the patience of the Lord. It is clear that the success or failure of this assignment did not rest on Moses' facility with languages. It did not depend on Moses' eloquence nor does it depend on ours! When God calls, He is not seeking a lecture on disability, but He is seeking our availability. God said, "Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say," v. 12. This response left Moses without excuse.

5. Moses: "... send by the hand of whomever else You may send," 4:13-17. Not to be deterred, Moses offers one final excuse, but one that goes to the heart of his problem. Moses uses another Hebrew idiom when he said, "O my Lord please send by the hand of whomever you may send!" v.13. It simply meant, "Choose anyone else, but don't choose me!" "Send somebody, send anybody, but please don't send me!" All of his previous logic is now set aside

in the revelation of the real reason for Moses' previous four objections. He simply did not want to do what God asked him to do.

All too often our excuses for not giving God the obedience He requires are a cover for the real heart of the issue. We just don't want to do what God asks us to do. Or, we don't want to go where He wants us to go, or when He wants us to go. May God give us the wisdom and the fortitude to accept the assignments that He gives to us. There is great risk in declining the commands of God that may include loss of blessing, even the loss of one's life for obstinate rebellion, see Lev 10:1-7; 1 Cor 11:29-30.

**Lesson:** God's patience wears thin when He constantly has to coerce us to do what He called us to do.

**God's Answer:** "So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses," v. 14. God said, "Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know he can speak well. And look. He is also coming out to meet you. When he sees you he will be glad in his heart. Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So he shall be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God. And you shall take his rod in your hand with which you shall do the signs," 4:14-17.

God's revelation that Aaron was already on his way to meet Moses, 4:27-28, was an additional sign of God's providential provision. Moses will be the voice of God and will put the necessary words in the mouth of Aaron. This is a wonderful confirmation of the divine inspiration of Scripture as described in Exodus 33:11; Hebrews 1:1; 3:7; and 2 Peter 1:16-21. God made it clear to Moses that He would not accept NO for an answer. He also made it clear that all excuses were invalid and there was no need to present any others. God would be with him and he would also have Aaron as his assistant to do the work that God had planned. God's summary in 4:14-17 is designed to put an end to any and all objections and to move Moses forward with the implementation of God's plan to secure the release of the Hebrews.

When God calls, trust His judgment, take the assignment, rely upon Him, and let God accomplish His purposes.