

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 3

God of Abraham

Exodus 3:1-22

God's Surprising Choice

Moses was a disgrace. Once he was a promising Egyptian prince. He was reared in the palace of the most powerful and glorious civilization in the world. He was given the best education. He had power and influence, but he threw it all away by murdering a man. His offense was heinous, for he killed an Egyptian while protecting a Hebrew, the slave class. Moses had to flee for his life. Out in the desert he fell in with some shepherds, and even married one of their daughters. Egyptians despised shepherds. This was as low as Moses could fall. Now he was an old man. Half of his life – 40 years – has been wasted chasing sheep around the desert. At 80 years old, Moses has nothing to look forward to.

Where do you expect to be when you are 80 years old? Will you be ready to take on a new career? Will you be thrilled to pack up, move to the land of your enemy, challenge the most powerful ruler in the world, and lead 3 million people across the desert? If you had spent the best years of your life as a janitor, how would you respond if you were called to some great task? It is not surprising that Moses could not believe that God wanted him to lead His people out of Egypt. Forty years of failure! Eighty years old! Moses had nothing that would qualify him for the biggest role in human history until Christ. Nothing that man could recognize. But when we factor God into the equation, Moses was the perfect choice.

A quick review for those of you who missed the first two weeks. The human race was corrupted by sin and fell to worshipping idols. God called one man – Abraham – to leave his family and homeland. God promised to make a new nation – a God-fearing nation – out of Abraham. And from this nation God would bless the whole world. This promise passed from Abraham to his son Isaac and to his son Jacob. One of Jacob's sons became enslaved in Egypt. When that son, Joseph, interpreted a dream for the Egyptian king, Pharaoh made Joseph prime minister of Egypt. Then a famine hit the whole Middle East, and Joseph brought his family to Egypt where there was food. Now we are 400 years later, and the descendants of Jacob have grown into a nation within Egypt. The Egyptians became afraid the Hebrews would revolt, so they enslaved them. The Hebrews were cruelly treated and cried out to God for deliverance. The final verses of chapter two tell us,

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew. (Exodus 2:23-25)

We see here that God had a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A covenant is a personal bond. Marriage is a covenant. In marriage, a man and a woman promise to be faithfully bound to each other forever. God was bound to the Hebrew people, and He would never forsake them. So now when His people are enslaved and miserably treated, God will act to rescue them. And Moses is His choice to do so.

Moses and the Bush

What would you do if you saw a burning bush? If I were out in the desert, with no one around but some smelly sheep – I suppose I would think I was hallucinating. In fact, there is nothing normal about this scene. The fire was abnormal, the voice was abnormal, and even the ground was abnormal. The fire was not produced by combustion of the bush. This fire is the holy fire of heaven, the fire of God's presence. This is the fire that guarded the Garden of Eden after Adam sinned. This is the fire that made the covenant with Abraham. It is the fire that incinerated those abominable cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the fire that

will lead the people from Egypt and burn in the temple. This is the fire that the apostle John will see in the throne room of heaven. (Revelation 4:5) This fire is not a chemical reaction, but a spiritual reality. It is a visible manifestation of an invisible God. Verse two tells us that the angel of the Lord was in the fire. Angels appear in many places in the Bible, but this seems to be a special angel. All angels serve the Lord, but this particular phrase, “the angel of the Lord,” is used in a special way. Whenever it appears, it seems to mean not just any old angel, but God Himself. And as the scene unfolds, it appears that God Himself is speaking.

Even before God identifies Himself, the voice commands Moses to take off his sandals. The explanation for this is that the ground around the bush is holy. Now how can some ground be holy and other ground normal? And what is holy ground anyway? The root meaning of holy is “separate.” To be holy is to be separated from the ordinary. So a holy person is separate from other people; a holy object is separate from other objects. A holy place is separated from other places. God is holy in that He is separate from anything else we can know. Now since sin entered the world, holiness takes on a moral dimension as well. Now to be holy also means to separate from the sin in the world – to be morally pure. So a holy person is morally pure. God is the standard of holiness. Everything is considered in relation to Him. So a holy person is separated to serve God and is morally pure according to God’s standard. A holy object is separated to be used in worship of a holy God.

What made the ground around the bush holy? Dirt cannot sin, nor can it be morally pure. So what made this dirt holy was the presence of God. Wrapped up in this is man’s relation to the dirt. Man was made from dirt, and man was lord of the whole earth. So when man sinned, the ground was cursed on his account. The dirtiness of dirt symbolizes the pollution of sin. So shoes are a symbolic protection from the polluted earth. But God is perfectly holy. Sin and filth cannot exist in His presence, and everything He touches becomes holy and clean. So when God steps onto the earth, the ground becomes holy. Therefore it would be a gross insult to wear shoes on God’s holy ground. It would be like saying God’s ground is as filthy as all the other ground that man had polluted by his sin. It would be like wearing gloves when you come to see me. I would be very upset if you considered my house so dirty you needed to wear gloves when you visit. The ground around the bush was holy because God was there, and Moses recognized this by removing his sandals.

The voice warned Moses to stay back, and Moses was only too eager to comply. Moses was afraid – afraid even to look at the bush when he learned what it was. Here we learn a fundamental truth about God – that He is awesome. Now I sure do not mean God is awesome as in, “Dude that movie was awesome!” We have massively trivialized this potent word. God is awesome as in truly awe-inspiring. In other words, God inspires fear. God is great – so great that anyone who sees Him is struck with fear. God’s power, His purity, His wisdom – even His love – are truly frightening. Now some people are upset by such talk. They thought that God was nice and friendly, and it disturbs them to hear that God is fearsome. And when you point out some of the scriptures that say this, they interpret these scriptures to mean something different than fear. The replacement word that is usually substituted for fear is reverence. But this attempt to domesticate God is all wrong. God is a fearsome person, and He will not be domesticated.

Notice, however, that while Moses was shaking in his boots (or would have been if he had not removed them), he did not flee from God. This indicates two important facts. First, the fearsomeness of God does not terrify His people. If it is wrong to tame God by replacing “fear” with “reverence,” it is also wrong to distort God by replacing “fear” with “terror.” God does not lash out in irrational anger. God does not torment people for the fun of it. When God brings disaster upon people or nations, there is always an important reason for it. The frightening power, purity, and love of God are under control. Although God is largely unpredictable, we know He acts to save His people and punish the wicked. This is the moral framework in which His power, purity, and love operate. God is fearsome because of the sheer magnitude

of His character, but He does not terrorize us with capriciousness. So Moses did not have to flee. He could be sure that he would be safe – even with the Creator of the universe right there at arm’s length – as long as he obeyed God’s voice.

The second fact revealed by Moses’ not fleeing from the voice in the bush is his faith in God. Some people might have fled at the mere sight of a constantly burning bush, but many would have fled when they learned that God was present. As we said, God will not terrify people, but He will punish the wicked – and that is the catch. Now every honest person will admit that he is sinful. No one is pure enough to stand in God’s presence. But what set Moses apart from every other person was his trust in God to keep His promises. Remember we said that God made a covenant with the Hebrews. God promised to give them the land of Canaan. God promised to give them amazing blessings. This is something Moses could count on. Moses could trust God to protect him – if He believed God is the sort of person who would keep His promises. If not, if God were in fact capricious, Moses would have no hope of surviving this interview. But Moses believed in God and trusted His promises. On this faith, Moses was able to risk talking to God.

This is the reason why unbelievers do not go to church and Bible studies. Some people have this idea that if we make worship more appealing unbelievers will come. Nonsense! Now of course we should strive to make church and RUF Bible studies as appealing as possible. We must be genuinely friendly and welcoming. But if God is present in the reading of scripture, in prayer, and in the sacraments – unbelievers will be afraid – and justifiably so. And if unbelievers are comfortable in church and Bible studies, we should ask if God is truly present in our midst. Only when God begins to waken faith in their hearts will unbelievers be drawn to worship.

Who am I?

How would you react if God spoke to you and said, “Mark, go to Washington D.C. I am going to make you president of the United States.” Would you say, “Sure thing, God. Thanks for recognizing my amazing abilities?” Would you run and hide? Would you be excited at the chance to clean up that mess down there?

Moses knew with a vividness that only comes from seeing with his own eyes, how grievously his people have been suffering. I am sure that Moses himself often prayed for God to deliver the Hebrews from the cruel Egyptians. But for forty years there had been no answer. What would you do if you prayed for something for forty years and there was no answer? Would you give up? Would you conclude that God does not care? Would you abandon your faith in God? Many people do when God does not immediately answer their prayers. They pray for an aunt to be cured from cancer, and she dies. They pray for God to repair their parents’ marriage, but He does not. When faced with profound disappointments like this, many people decide they have no use for a God who will not answer such prayers as they wish. But Moses’ faith endured for forty years of silence. Moses still trusted God, so he must have thrilled to hear God say that He had indeed heard all those prayers. At last God was coming to the rescue! The ancient promises would now come true! The Hebrews would escape from their horrible conditions in Egypt and enter the glorious promised land. What a day this will be!

But then comes the kicker. “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10) Who is that? Did God say “you?” What could this mean? Let’s replay that last line again. God said that Moses – the sorry failure – would lead the people out of Egypt. What a laughable idea! But Moses did not laugh. Probably he knew God too well to think He was joking. Now here is a serious problem. God wants Moses to lead the rescue operation.

As we study this interview with God, we are going to see that Moses is amazingly insightful. His first question for God is exactly the right question to ask. We can summarize Moses’ question this way:

“Who am I?” Yes, who indeed is Moses? Is Moses the brilliant, well-educated prince of Egypt? Is he the shepherd who knows the desert like no other Hebrew? Or is he the cast-off failure? Who is Moses anyway?

There are two parts to the answer. First Moses, like every man and woman, was a stunning creature that possessed god-like qualities. That is what it means to be in the image of God. We have been duped by our culture, and I include the church in this assertion. We act as though man is the apex of evolution, the most intelligent primate. At root we think of man as a highly developed animal. Christians add a soul to this description. But the Bible tells us this is all wrong. Man is not primarily known as the highest animal. He is the lowest of the heavenly beings. Psalm 8 states this beautifully.

What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:4-5)

So on the one hand, Moses is a quasi-divine being with incredible abilities, honed by his excellent education and unique experiences. Of all men on earth, no one was more qualified to lead the Hebrews to freedom than Moses.

But man is also thoroughly sinful. Psalm 51:5 says, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” From the instant of conception we are polluted with sin, and we sin more wickedly all our lives – unless we turn to God for salvation. Even then residual sin clings to us. So Moses is chronically deformed by sin, and incapable of completely serving God. Moses knew that his human qualities, stellar as they were, could not make up for his grave spiritual weakness. Moses, like all men, was utterly incompetent to perform a spiritual task. There was no way he was going to successfully lead the Hebrews to freedom.

In this passage Moses speaks for us all. All of us – everyone here in this room – is an amazing creature. Think for a moment of the astonishing skill of Justin on the violin, of Ben Jefferis in math and engineering, of Garrett in amusing us – and I could go on and mention everyone of you. We all are made in the image of God, and there is something about us that is so wonderful, it reminds us of God. In fact, we are true reflections of the true God, and so we are capable of astonishing achievements. But at the same time we are deformed by sin. We should rejoice in the strengths of each other, but instead we become jealous. We should share in each other’s sorrows, but we are too busy to notice or care. Sin penetrates into the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds and renders us useless for any spiritual task. We are utterly incompetent to be president of RUF, or lead a mission trip, or play violin in worship, or even lead an edifying social event.

All this is true, but did you notice that God did not answer Moses’ question? Did you notice that we went to Genesis and Psalms and other books of the Bible to find our answers? God assumed, because it is true, that man is amazingly capable and utterly incompetent. But it does not matter! The glorious message in God’s answer is that our weakness – even our sin – will not stand in the way of serving God. The issue – the only issue – is not our capability, but God’s presence. Without God Moses was a helpless fool, as we saw last week. Forty years ago he tried to rescue his people, and it was a ridiculous failure. But now everything has changed. Moses is still Moses – with all his gifts and faults – but now God is with him. And with God’s presence, he cannot fail.

Do you see how this applies to you? What were Jesus’ last words before He left this earth? “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) God has given us the same promise He gave to Moses. God will always be with you. And this means that you are able to serve Him – even in your

weakness. Last week we talked about opening your eyes to see the needs of people around you, and then acting to help them. We talked about how many of us feel inadequate to serve God. Perhaps you see that your roommate is in a destructive relationship – but what should you do? Maybe a guy down the hall is failing calculus or freshman English, but you are not real great at those courses either. And then who of us feels adequate to tell others about Jesus? Is that why you have spent all this time with guys on your hall and have not mentioned Jesus to some of them?

The lesson here is that Moses – one of the greatest men who ever lived – felt just like you. He felt inadequate to do what God called him to do. And it is true, both you and Moses are inadequate in your own strength. But God has promised to be with you. God has not promised to make you eloquent. He has not promised to make you a genius. But He has promised to be with you, and that is enough. You do not have to be eloquent or a genius if God is with you. His presence will make you a success.

Who are You?

God's presence is enough for success, but Moses had a few more questions for God. His next question is the most important of all. In essence Moses asks God who He is.

Moses presents this question as an issue the people of Israel might raise. This strikes me as unlikely. Up until this point the Hebrews had referred to their God as simply "God" – "El" in the Hebrew language. Often they attached an adjective or another noun specify something about this God, as in El-Shaddai, God Almighty. Earlier in this conversation God identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In asking his question, Moses calls Him "God of our fathers." It seems that these are the ways the Hebrews commonly spoke about God. I think these names were adequate for the people of Israel, and in fact when Moses finally goes to them in Egypt, there is no indication that anyone asks for God's name.

But Moses was not satisfied with these general titles for God. Moses wanted to know God's personal name. Why is this? For the same reason anyone might want to know another person's name. It is a sign of intimacy. You may call the person who teaches you your professor – but that is not his name. You may call him Dr. Jones – but there are many Dr. Joneses in this world, and most people use that form of address for this man. But if you call him Harry, you are expressing a deeper level of intimacy. That is how Dr. Jones' family and close friends address him. Moses is saying he is not satisfied to know God in generic terms. If he is going to follow this God, Moses wants a more personal, a more intimate relationship with Him. And the amazing thing is that God grants this request.

God answers Moses request for His name, but the answer sets the gold standard for murkiness. At first glance it appears that God gives three names. First He says, "I AM WHO I AM." Then He says, "Say this... 'I AM has sent me to you.'" And in the next verse God says, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers,... has sent me to you.'" So which is it? I AM WHO I AM? Or simply I AM? Or is it The LORD?

In Hebrew all these names are related, and all are a play on the "be" verb." The last name mentioned, The LORD, is not really the word for lord at all. It is a noun formed by the letters of the "be" verb. Our best guess is that it is "Yahweh". So why are we guessing about God's name? Isn't that rather scandalous? Here is the problem. Ancient Hebrew was written using only consonants. At a time when writing material was very expensive and hard to get, that was an important economy. Besides, ancient Hebrew had a comparatively small vocabulary, so it was not hard to recognize word simply by their consonants. Even with a much richer language like English you would be amazed how well you can piece together a text if you only have the consonants – as long as you know the words they represent! The consonants for God's name are YHWH. Centuries later the Jews devised a way to indicate the vowels of their words, using little marks above and below the consonants. But the vowels they added for this word make it impossible to

pronounce. That is because by that time the Jews did not pronounce God's name. They considered it sacrilegious. So when they read scriptures that included it, they said "Adonai", which is the Hebrew word for lord. And to indicate this they put the vowels for the word Adonai with the consonants for God's name. Now thousands of years later we cannot be certain how this name was pronounced, and English versions print LORD in small caps to represent the divine name.

There is much we could say about what God's name reveals. It is the sort of things that philosophers and theologians love to ponder. We are just going to touch on a few points. First, God's name reveals His timelessness. It is a tenseless verb. It could be translated either "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." God is past, present, and future. He created time and exists outside of time. Second, God's name indicates self-definition. God, not we, define who He is. People always resist this. How often have you heard someone say, "My God would never send someone to hell?" People demand to define who God is, but God will not allow it. Furthermore, since God is the Creator and Ruler, He defines everything else. God defines goodness and justice and beauty, sin and evil. Third, this name reveals God's self-existence. God depends on no one else for His existence. Finally, this name conveys the inscrutability of God. While there is much we can know about God, we always reach the limit of our knowledge and affirm the mystery of God's nature.

Knowing God

Do you desire to know God intimately? Or are you satisfied to coast along with a passing acquaintance? In the New Covenant God has revealed His name more fully to us. When God came to earth in the flesh, He was called "Jesus," because He would save us from our sins. God was always known as "Father," but the Jews did not address Him that way. But Jesus urged us to call God our Father. And before He ascended to the throne, Jesus gave us the triune name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These names reveal God so much more fully than Moses knew.

But the main thing the New Covenant reveals is the depth of God's love for us. God lived among us, suffered our hardship, died for us, and rose to rule the earth for us. Do you not desire to know God intimately? God invites you to do so? Dare you refuse?

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