

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 4

God of Israel

Exodus 4:1-31

The Impossible Task

Dan was complaining last week. I will spare you the boring details, but the gist of it was that his professor was behind in his lectures, so he had not yet covered the material in the assigned homework. You have probably had a similar experience, of being asked to do something which is nigh impossible. Kristen must feel this way when she attempts to clean up my office. Your mother probably has the same reaction to your room. But seriously, if you have ever been required to do an assignment or job which has huge consequences, you know the panic that grips you when you realize you cannot complete the task.

Last week Moses met God. Herding sheep out in the far reaches of the desert, he came upon a bush that burned, but was never consumed. This was strange enough, but then a voice came out of the bush, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5) Now Moses was truly afraid, because he saw that God was present. The text tells us that Moses was afraid to look at God, but Moses was not so terrified to flee. Moses knew that God had a covenant with Israel. Even though the Israelites were not perfect, God had promised to bless them, and Moses knew that he could count on God to take care of him.

God explained that He had heard the cry of His people in Egypt, and was going to deliver them. This must have been music to Moses’ ears. The Israelites had been praying for help for decades, and now God was answering their prayer! The cruel slavery in Egypt was coming to an end. But the next part of God’s message came as a shock – Moses was the man to lead the people to freedom! Moses had failed once in such an attempt 40 years ago. Now he was 80 years old. Moses felt trapped. He was too old and too ill-equipped. God was expecting Him to do the impossible.

Moses had to do something, so he asked God a question. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) This was a good question. Last week we saw that Moses, like all of us, is both a bearer of the divine image, and also a wretched sinner – capable of amazing achievements, and spiritually bankrupt. Moses was a very capable person, but his own abilities were woefully inadequate to accomplish such a huge task. But God did not answer Moses’ question. He did something better, something more wonderful – He promised to go with Moses. No matter how poor your abilities, you can do anything when God is your companion. This was a fabulous promise! It should have been a great comfort to Moses. It is also a great comfort to us. Jesus has promised always to be with us. This is a great comfort and encouragement to us. With Jesus as our companion, we also can do anything He expects us to do.

If God is going to go with Moses, he wanted to know more about this God. “What is your name?” was Moses’ next question. God honored this bold request and told Moses His personal name, Yahweh – usually represented in our Bibles as LORD in small caps. Moses was not satisfied with a superficial knowledge of God. He wanted to know God more intimately. We saw also that God has revealed Himself in the New Covenant as Jesus, as Father, and as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God invites us to know Him intimately, and we would be foolish to refuse.

We left off last week with these two excellent questions. But Moses is not finished with God. He has two more questions before he is ready to return to Egypt.

They Will Not Believe Me

Moses' third question is, "What if they do not believe me?" This seems like a good question. Think, Moses has been gone for forty years. Perhaps his family will not recognize him. Perhaps they are dead. What if he appears to the Israelites as a man crazed by the desert sun? How would you respond if some stranger knocked on your door and offered to help you with some terrible task? What would you think if he claimed to be sent by God?

This question seems reasonable, but it hints at a problem. God said, in no uncertain terms, that Moses would lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. God promised to go with Moses. There is no possibility of failure. God will be there to ensure that Moses accomplishes his goal. God's promise should have been sufficient to reassure Moses, but God did more. He gave Moses a sign to confirm His promise. God said, "This shall sign for you...you shall serve God on this mountain." (Exodus 3:12) Moses had God's word and a sign. There was no room for doubt. If Moses doubted the success of his mission, he was not trusting God.

But perhaps Moses was not doubting, but raising a possible problem. It is realistic for Moses to expect problems. He knew something about these Israelites, and he had good reason to think that they may not immediately accept him. Perhaps Moses' question was not so much an expression of unbelief as a request for help solving a likely problem. The text does not reveal what was going on in Moses' heart. It simply tells us that God willingly gave Moses three more signs that he could show the people of Israel to prove that God had sent him. And all three signs reveal something about the deliverance God would provide.

The first sign was turning Moses' staff into a serpent. Now a staff was the primary tool of a shepherd. It would be very helpful as a walking stick in the rough, rocky desert. A shepherd would use it to drive away predators and to nudge the sheep to go in the correct direction. The first lesson we learn from this sign is that God uses what we have in His service. Can you wrestle? Are you a math whiz? Are you a musician? Is your family wealthy? Everyone here has some remarkable ability. As we saw last week, all human beings have god-like qualities because we are made in God's image. And when you believe in Jesus and become a Christian, Jesus gives you the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts to use in His service. The gifts of preaching and evangelism are more noticeable, but everyone – without exception – has been endowed with some spiritual gift. The lesson here is that God will use you as you are in His service. Moses did not have a chariot or sword to face Pharaoh. God used the staff that he had. Do not waste your time wishing that you were someone else. You may not have the strength or the intelligence or the wealth of others, but you have just what you need. God will use what you have to do what He calls you to do.

God could have performed any number of miracles with Moses' staff – so why did He turn it into a serpent? When people encounter a question such as this, they tend to let their imagination wander in search of an answer. This is not a good idea. This is what leads to many foolish ideas about prophecy. A better approach is to search the scripture for other places where there is a serpent and see what light that sheds on the current passage. The principle here is using the Bible to interpret itself. In this case we do not have far to look, for we see a serpent in the third chapter of the Bible. There we find that Satan appeared to Eve in the form of a serpent and enticed her to sin. And if we took a long detour from our study of Exodus, we would find the serpent all through the Bible as a symbol of Satan and satanic influence. This miracle of the staff reminds us that Satan was created by God and is controlled by God. This is also a foretaste of the spiritual battle that awaits Moses in Egypt.

Moses was afraid of the serpent. But when God told him to pick it up, he did. And Moses even picked it up by the tail. If you have ever had any experience of snakes, you know that this is the worst way to pick up one. If you pick up a snake by the tail, it is easy for the snake to curl around and bite you. The correct way to pick up a snake is right behind its head. That way it cannot bite you. So why did Moses pick it up by the tail? Because God commanded him to do it that way. Here we see that although Moses feared

the snake, he feared God more. It was scary to grab the snake by the tail, but the consequences of disobeying God are far worse. Remember the words of Jesus, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28) Moses feared God more than a snake, or even Satan. And when Moses obeyed God, the snake turned right back into his own useful staff.

The second sign was the transformation of Moses’ hand into a leprous condition. Scholars are unsure exactly what the leprosy in the Bible was, but there is general agreement that it was not the same as the disease we call leprosy today. The leprosy in the Bible was a fearful disease for which there was no cure. Later, God gave laws regarding leprosy. A person with this disease was required to keep himself separate from all other people. He was excluded from all human society and from worshiping God until a priest certified that the leprosy was gone. But in the Bible the verbs used for the cure of leprosy are not medical terms. In biblical terms a leper is not healed, he is cleansed. Leprosy is the disease that symbolized sin. And just as the leper needs cleansing from his horrible disease, so everyone needs cleansing from the pollution of sin.

This sign showed that God is lord of our health. God can afflict and heal at will. Down in Egypt God will afflict the Egyptians with various diseases to force them to release their Hebrew slaves. God is also lord of sin. No matter how bad your sin, God can heal you of it. Like leprosy, sin is incurable. Ever since Adam sinned, sin is inextricably bound into human nature. You can pretend you are good, you can lie about your sin, you can try real hard to improve your morals – but you can never escape sin. The only remedy for sin is God’s healing touch. Only when God sends His Spirit to give you a new nature can you break free from enslavement to sin. And only in the resurrection will we completely escape sin’s presence.

The third sign was also a foretaste of what God would do in Egypt to liberate His people. The Nile was the lifeblood of Egypt. It hardly ever rains there, so the water of the Nile is absolutely necessary for the survival of Egypt. If the Nile died, Egypt died. And if God controls the Nile, God controls Egypt. And if God controls Egypt, obviously He will be able to set the captives free. The three signs God gave Moses were impressive demonstrations of His presence and power. They were more than enough to convince the Israelites that God had truly sent Moses.

I Am Not Eloquent

If there was some ambiguity in Moses’ third question, there is no doubt about his attitude in his fourth – which actually is not a question, but an objection. How could Moses lead a nation if he is a poor speaker? This also is a plausibly reasonable concern. Speaking ability is central to leadership. The greatest president in the second half of the 20th century, Ronald Reagan, was nicknamed “The Great Communicator.” And many of the problems of our current president stem from his weakness in public speaking. The problem with this objection is that God has already promised success. Sure, speaking ability is inherent to leadership, and doubtless this will be a concern for Moses. But it has no bearing on the success of his work. God has promised that Moses will succeed in leading the people of Israel out of Egypt! If this is true – if God is not lying – then obviously God will overcome whatever problems arise. So Moses is worried about his speaking ability. So what? God will accomplish His plan in spite of this problem.

God proceeds to explain why this must be the case. Who made Moses’ mouth – the mouth that is not eloquent? God, of course. Implied in this statement is the truth that God made Moses’ mouth just the way He wanted Moses’ mouth to be. To be blunt about it, Moses’ cannot speak well because God *made* him a poor speaker. It is silly of Moses to inform God of his speaking ability when God made him the way he is. But of course if God made Moses’ mouth, He also has the power to use Moses’ mouth anyway He wishes. God can take Moses’ mouth which does not speak well, and make it eloquent if He wishes. So we see that Moses’ objection to going to Egypt is rather ridiculous, and God makes the slightly ridiculous

statement that He will be with Moses' mouth.

Here I Am, Send Him!

Finally Moses comes to the point and tells God that he does not want to go back to Egypt and lead the Israelites to freedom. At this point Moses' previous concerns look suspiciously false. Moses' concern about his qualifications, his worry about being believed, and the concern about his speaking ability were just excuses. The plain truth is that Moses did not want to obey God.

Moses is an easy target in this passage, but we are just like him, aren't we? Aren't we always making excuses for not serving God? And wow, how plentiful are the excuses. They are low-hanging fruit. You do not reach out to others because you do not know how. You do not take a leadership role in RUF because you do not have the gifts. Well, OK. Not everyone is called to be a leader. So do you help with the homework club? Oh no, you do not know how to cook – (but Dan reminds you every week that you do not need to know how to cook). Do you invite the lonely people on your hall or in your class to the Friday night social event? No, because you have other plans with funner people. Well, do you invite them to large group? OK, perhaps they are busy Tuesday night. So do you invite them to Bible study? Excuses, excuses – there are endless excuses. And the excuse that trumps all excuses – schoolwork. Now I want you to know that your schoolwork is a top priority. God did not bring you to Lehigh to attend RUF functions. He brought you here to learn a field of study. But you know as well as I do that you use schoolwork just like Moses used his legitimate concerns – as an excuse. On occasion you will have a week that is so busy you will even rush through your meals – or skip them. But most of the time your life is packed with some things which are not all that important – activities which are not bad, but which you could give up or cut back. And if you are skipping meals and losing sleep every week because of your schoolwork, you are in the wrong courses.

At this point we see Moses as a pathetic whiner. He has everything he needs to accomplish God's call, but he just does not want to go. Now what would you do in this situation if you were God? Would you blast Moses for his stupidity and his disobedience? Or would you walk away in disgust? I think we all would agree that Moses does not deserve to be the hero of the Exodus. I think most of us would have lost our patience with him by now. And that is generally how we treat each other. Scripture says, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." (Hebrews 10:24) Sometimes we are stubborn. We need to be stirred up. But those who should be doing the stirring get tired, and quit.

This week I was thinking of how John Calvin, the great reformer of the church in Geneva, came to minister in that city. Calvin did not want to be a pastor. He was by nature a shy and scholarly man. As a young man he heard the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. He saw the desperate condition of the church and committed himself to reform, but he planned to do it as a scholar and writer. This was a plausible course. As we can see now by his copious literary output, Calvin was very gifted as a scholar and writer. But the desperate need of the moment was for a man of towering intellect and steely determination to lead the reform in Geneva. Calvin was traveling through the Swiss cantons and planned to stay one night in Geneva before moving on. Hearing that Calvin was in town, a fiery reformer named William Farel went to Calvin and declared that God's judgment would be upon him if he refused to stay in Geneva. "I declare to you, in the name of the Almighty God – to you who only put forth your studies as a pretence – that if you will not help us to carry on this work of God, the curse of God will rest upon you, for you will be seeking your own honor rather than that of Christ."¹ Shaken by this powerful message, Calvin remained – and the rest is history.

¹ *William Farel*; William Blackburn (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1865)
http://www.americanpresbyterianchurch.org/farel_in_geneva.htm #Calvin%20United%20With%20Farel;
Accessed 2/2/2008.

It would be wrong to pull a stunt like this in most cases. This was a special situation, and God led William Farel to make an impassioned appeal that in other circumstances would be shameless manipulation. But in this case Farel was following the example of God in not giving up on a man who was called to great service.

God does not give up on His people. Even when they are stubborn and disobedient, God never gives up. We pointed out last week that God has a covenant with His people. A covenant is an irreversible bond – like marriage. God is bound to His people, which included Moses. Moses may whine and complain and drag his feet, but God will work with him until he obeys.

Ambush on the Way!

The second half of this chapter briefly recounts the events that brought Moses to Egypt. First Moses asked his father-in-law for permission to leave. This is not because Moses' father-in-law was in charge of Moses household. It is because Moses was employed by him. By going to Egypt Moses' father-in-law would be losing a mature, experienced shepherd. This would be a huge change in the management of the flocks. Now you may say, "Hey, God told Moses to go. His father-in-law cannot stop him." This is true. But God does not want Moses to act rudely or to be insensitive to his position in Jethro's business. And if God is in this, Moses can count on God to give his father-in-law the mind to dismiss Moses with his blessing.

We encounter analogous situations in the 21st century. I landed a rich prize the summer of my sophomore year. I got a job in a laboratory on campus doing exciting research in virus genetics. I told the professor I could start a few days after final exams were over. Then a few weeks later I was selected to serve on the exec team of our campus ministry. One of the requirements of this position was to attend camp after exams. Now I had two competing commitments. I could tell the rest of the exec team that I could not go to camp, and let them do the planning on their own. After all, I had given my word to my professor. Or I could tell my professor that I could not come in until a week later. God's work is more important than lab work, right? But neither of these responses is the right way to act. God gave me the wisdom to go and ask my professor for permission to come a week later. And he was delighted to grant it. God gave him a heart to give me my request.

In verses 21-23 God reveals His relationship to the people of Israel. He calls Israel His firstborn son. Firstborn sons were given special privileges. They received a double portion of the inheritance, they were responsible for the care of their parents, and they received the blessing of their father. By designating Israel His firstborn, God is saying that He has adopted this nation as His special people. The promises of deliverance for all the earth will pass down through this nation. Now with the coming of Jesus, He is the firstborn of God, and all we who believe in Him are part of the New Israel.

Verses 24-26 are one of the strangest passages in the Bible. Part of the difficulty of understanding it is the confusion of the pronouns. It is unclear in verse 24 whom God sought to kill – Moses or Moses' son. And the phrase "bridegroom of blood" is perplexing. But the main point of this passage is clear. God was going to kill someone because Moses' son was not circumcised.

The reason this passage troubles us is that we treat rituals lightly. Many Americans, and most Evangelical Christians think that what matters is your thoughts and feelings, not rituals. The issue with sex is not whether you are married, but if you love each other. The issue with God is whether you love Him, not whether you are a member of the church. But God has appointed rituals for us, and they mean a great deal to Him. Marriage is not an empty ceremony, but a ritual which changes people forever. Before marriage a man and a woman are single individuals. Afterward they are bound to each other – and this bond changes their whole future. The issue with God is not simply a question of agreeing to some theological facts, or

possessing a religious feeling, or making some vague commitment. God has called those who believe in Him to be bound to Him by a specific ritual – baptism. Baptism is the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision. They both accomplish the same thing. Both bind a person to God. Baptism and circumcision are acts of God, in which He binds Himself to a person. Whether as an infant or an adult, these sacraments are effective because God makes them effective – and they change everything about a person’s future.

Moses got into trouble here because He attempted to leave the wilderness and enter the assembly of God’s people with an unprotected child. God is a fearsome God, and He will not take open rebellion lightly. Moses’ refusal to circumcise his son almost got someone killed. The same principle applies in the New Covenant. Baptism is a requirement for participation in the church. It makes you a member of the church and protects you from God’s anger. I do not mean that an unbaptized person may not come to church services. I mean an unbaptized person may not become an officer or partake of the Lord’s Supper. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that God may make such a person sick, or even kill him for doing so (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). If you believe in Jesus and have never been baptized, I urge you to see me or your pastor soon about this.

The last paragraph tells us that Moses arrived in Egypt and everything happened just as God said it would. The people of Israel believed his message and worshiped God. Now the stage is set for a showdown with Pharaoh.

Conclusion

We have been applying this passage all evening, so I will just summarize the lessons here. God has bound Himself to you – if you have been baptized – and will never let you go. This is a great encouragement. It is a huge relief to know that even when we do stupid and sinful things God will not abandon us. This is an absolute promise – something you can count on. We also saw the foolishness of making excuses. When God calls you to serve Him, He will grant you success. It is sinful to make excuses. Do not be a whiner. Believe God. Trust Him to accomplish His work through you. Find your role in God’s kingdom and get busy. And may God use us to deliver hundreds of people at Lehigh from slavery to sin.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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