EXODUS 3 AND 4: “Come, I Will Send You”

Our study of Exodus begins in Chapter 3 with God’s call of Moses. Just to give you a perspective on the timetable of Genesis and Exodus: from the time Joseph dies at the end of Genesis to the time God calls Moses here in Exodus 3, how many years has past? Answer: 360 (1806 to 1446 BC).

When I was a kid in SS many years ago I remember this as the story of “Moses and the Burning Bush.” But that’s not exactly accurate, is it? Because, according to verse 3 the bush is not burned. It only appeared to be on fire. As Chapter 3 opens, Moses is out in the wilderness tending sheep. He’s now 80 years old! Matthew Henry commented on this. He said, “Sometimes it is long before God calls his servants to the work he designed them for.” So a lot has happened in Moses’ life prior to Chapter 3. Going back to the first two chapters of Exodus a Pharaoh comes to power who did not know Joseph. Fearing the ever increasing Hebrew population he enslaved the people of Israel and put them to forced labor. In an attempt to control the Israelite population boom, Pharaoh issued a decree that the midwives were to kill all the Hebrew baby boys; the baby Moses was hidden by his mother in a basket boat, he was discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised up in privilege in the royal palace. Moses’ mother is assigned the job as Moses’ personal nurse. That was a God thing. Later, as an adult, Moses observed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. He became angry and killed the Egyptian. When Moses learned that there were witnesses to what he had done, he fled Egypt and settled in the land of Midian. He took up residence with Jethro, the priest of Midian, and eventually married his daughter Zipporah. Jethro gave Moses a job tending his flocks. Meanwhile, back in Egypt the suffering of the Israelites moved them to cry out to God. Chapter 2 ends with the words, “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.” The NASB says, “and God took notice of them.”

Now, fast forward 40 years… Chapter 3

READ Exodus 3:1-3

Moses is going about his normal routine tending his father-in-law’s sheep. We’re told he is out in the wilderness near Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. This is the same mountain as Mount Sinai, where later (Exo 19-31) God will give Moses the law. So Moses is shepherding the sheep when he sees the most unusual sight – a bush appears to be on fire, yet the bush is not consumed! So, Moses moves in closer to get a better look and to try and figure out what’s going on with this bush. Now that God has Moses’ full attention it says here that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the flame. Literally the angel of the Lord means “the messenger of Yahweh.” As we read further we discover that this is, in fact, God Himself! Now some commentaries suggest that the angel of the Lord here is the pre-incarnate Christ. That’s possible, but we don’t know that for certain.

READ Exodus 3:4-6

Moses stands in the presence of the one and true, holy, living God and his response – fear – is the normal and appropriate human response. We’re told that “he hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.” When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up he was overwhelmed by his own unworthiness and he cried out: “Woe is me! For I am lost…I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” When Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord, he fell on his face. When the people of Israel later stood at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 20 they could see the manifest presence of God upon that mountain. “When all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled. When the apostle John saw the Lord in Revelation, “one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe…a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire…” when John saw this he fell at his feet as though dead. So when humans come into the presence of God their normal reaction is fear. God warns Moses, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Putting off one’s sandals was a sign of respect and submission in that culture. So, what makes this particular place holy ground? It is holy because God is there. Well, God is there, out in the middle of nowhere, conversing with Moses, for a reason…

READ Exodus 3:7-9

God tells Moses that He intends to deliver His oppressed people Israel out of Egyptian bondage. His plan of redemption is twofold – (1) to release His people from their oppressed condition as slaves but then after their release (2) bring them and settle them in the Promised Land – “to a land that is good and spacious…flowing with milk and honey.” God is a covenant keeping God and He is going to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham (Gen 12), Isaac (Gen 17) and Jacob (Gen 26). God’s redemptive plan for His people involves His mercy (removing them from a bad situation) and His grace (leading them to a good place). It’s the same for us N.T. believers isn’t it? Ephesians 2:5-6 speaks to this. It says, “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God has] made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- and [He] raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” So, we have been delivered from our enslaved condition to sin, saved from the sting of death, saved from a devil’s hell, yes. But we have been saved to eternal life, to a relationship with God, to the hope of an everlasting home with Jesus.

Well, at this point Moses has to be pretty excited! This is great news! God has finally come and He is about to intervene in the plight of the Hebrew people, his people! But that’s not all. God has something more to tell Moses…

READ Exodus 3:10

Now before we get to Moses’ reaction, which is less than enthusiastic, let me ask you this – why Moses? OK, sure Moses seems to be well-qualified for the task at hand. He grew up learning the Jewish traditions from his mother, had a good education in Egypt, probably had some leadership training, Jethro a priest probably taught Moses more about God and imparted words of godly wisdom. And Moses has proved himself over the last 40 years to be responsible shepherding a large flock. So you could make the case from a human standpoint that Moses is a reasonable choice to lead God’s people (even if he is a murderer).

But when I ask, “Why Moses?” what I’m really getting at is this: Why doesn’t God just do it Himself. After all God is sovereign and self-sufficient and has vast resources. Why doesn’t God just send an army of angels? Why even involve Moses at all? Because God graciously includes us human beings in the fulfilling of His divine purposes. First Corinthians 3:9 says that we are God’s co-laborers, His fellow workers. First Corinthians 1:26 adds this: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him.” Here’s Paul’s point: When God successfully uses people that the world considers as foolish, weak, lowly, ordinary, unqualified, etc (when God uses people like us), then God alone receives the glory, and that is the way it should be. In our human deficiencies God shows forth His sufficiencies. It isn’t us doing it. It’s God doing it thru us. Here in Exodus 3 God has a mission that He’s going to carry out and He has chosen Moses to be the human agent by which He will accomplish it. It’s not about Moses, but it’s all about God.

Well for the rest of this chapter and most of Chapter 4 Moses is going to enlighten God as to why he, Moses, is not the right man for the job. He gives God several excuses as to why he believes he isn’t qualified. Our quarterly describes this as “reluctance.” I’ll take it one step further. It’s outright “resistance.” But God is so patient with Moses!

READ Exodus 3:11

Moses first excuse is “I am not worthy.” Well, in a sense none of us are worthy to do anything for God. But that’s not really the point. Like I said before, it’s not about us or our worthiness or our credentials. It’s about God and what He can and will accomplish through His servants, those who make themselves available to Him. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). It’s not about me! It’s not about you. It’s all about Him. It’s all because of Him! And in the end God gets the glory. Well listen to how God responds to Moses…

READ Exodus 3:12

“I will be with you.” What is the old expression? “God plus anyone is a majority.” And the sign, the evidence that I am with you is that you will bring all the people out of Egypt back to this very place to worship Me. It’s going to happen! God seems pretty sure of Himself. You would think at this point Moses would say, OK when do I leave? But no. More excuses…

READ Exodus 3:13

Excuse number 2 – “I don’t know what to say.” God’s response to this is a rather lengthy one and it runs all the way to the end of the chapter…

READ Exodus 3:14-22 *[Show the “I AM” slide and make comment briefly]*

So in answer to Moses’ question, “What do I say?” God not only tells him exactly what to say to the people, to the elders of Israel and to Pharaoh. But He also lays out for Moses exactly how it is all going to play out. God is giving Moses more than enough information. God knows Moses has his doubts and so God assures Moses that in the end Pharaoh WILL let God’s people go. He will be successful in his mission.

Is Moses satisfied with God’s answer and eagerly ready to go to Egypt? Not exactly. Now we get into Chapter 4 and Moses has yet another excuse.

READ Exodus 4:1

Excuse number 3 – “They won’t listen to me.” Well, God just told Moses back in Chapter 3 and verse 18, “And they will listen to your voice…” And implied in them listening to Moses is that they would believe what he said to them. Well, either Moses didn’t hear what God told him or he didn’t believe God. I get the impression that Moses just doesn’t want to do it. But God addresses Moses’ concern…

READ Exodus 4:2-9

So in response to Moses excuse that they will not listen or believe him, God gives Moses three signs he could use to convince them that he really is a messenger from God. The last two verses of Exodus Chapter 4 tell us, “Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.”

Just as God had told Moses, the people and the elders of Israel believed Moses and listened to him.

Well Moses isn’t done resisting God. More excuses.

READ Exodus 4:10

Excuse number 4 – “I’m not a good speaker.” By the way this just isn’t true. As it turns out Moses is quite an effective speaker when he allows God to use him and speak thru him. Again, it is not about us or our abilities or our talents. It’s about what God can and will do through us, His servants. Like Moses, we can make excuses all day long as to why we can’t do something for the Lord. And we’re right. We can’t. But HE CAN and that is really the point. God continues to be patient with Moses and He answers Moses’ concern…

READ Exodus 4:11-12

God’s answer is that I will control your speech. “I will teach you what you shall speak.”

Finally Moses gets honest with God. He’s been beating around the bush, no pun intended, but now he tells God how he really feels…

READ Exodus 4:13

Finally, the truth comes out. “I don’t want to do it.” Wrong answer, Moses!

READ Exodus 4:14a

One commentary I read said that Moses better be glad that God’s anger was only kindled and not in full flame or he might have been consumed. Again God shows such restraint and patience with Moses.

READ Exodus 4:14b-17

At this point Moses is satisfied that Aaron his brother will be accompanying him and will be by his side. So he prepares to leave and head to Egypt. It wasn’t God’s plan to have Aaron team up with Moses, but God allowed it, it was within His permissive will. As it would turn out Moses ended up being the primary spokesman and Aaron would play a minor role. In fact, Aaron would later be more of a problem than a help (leading complaints against Moses and stirring up the people with the golden calf).

Application. God has called all of us unto salvation. He has called all of us into service for Him. We are His people and we are to be about His work. Is it always crystal clear what God wants us do, specifically? No, but we should pray for a clear vision of where He wants us to serve. And when God shows us what it is He wants us to do, then we should prepare to do it. If God wants us to do a specific task He’ll open the doors and give us the tools we need to do it. As believers we have the Holy Spirit, His word, spiritual gifts, natural talents, experiences to draw on and the help of other believers. Remember, isn’t us doing it, it’s God working through us. Any success you or I have is all because of Him. So, that being the case, let’s be sure to give Him the glory. Let’s sing that great hymn of faith, “To Go Be the Glory!” Great things He has done in our lives and great things He wants to do thru us. “Come,” God says – “I will send you!”