

# Exodus | The Rise of a Liberator

## *I Am (The Call of Moses)*

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Exodus 3.1-14; 4.1-5, 10-17

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. <sup>7</sup> The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. <sup>9</sup> Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." <sup>13</sup> Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'

<sup>4.1</sup> Then Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" <sup>2</sup> The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." <sup>3</sup> Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. <sup>4</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail"-- so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand-- <sup>5</sup> "that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

<sup>10</sup> Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." <sup>11</sup> The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" <sup>12</sup> "Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say." <sup>13</sup> But he said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will." <sup>14</sup> Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. <sup>15</sup> You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. <sup>16</sup> Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people;

*and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. <sup>17</sup> "You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."*

TODAY we return to the Book of Exodus; we've been looking at this second book of the Bible and the story of the birth of a nation. This is, in a sense, the climax of the narrative, the moment the solution enters the story: the Calling of Moses.

Today, we want to think about our callings... that's an older word (calling/vocations) and today we speak of jobs...or work or occupation or career. But vocation, which literally means "calling", is really a way of looking at our work and relationships/routines that has definite religious or spiritual meaning. It implies that there is Someone who calls.

Today's passage is one of many passages through the whole Bible known as a "Call Narrative". You may know some: Noah, Abraham, Isaiah, Gideon, Samuel, Mary (mother of Jesus Christ), Saul of Tarsus to name just a few.

And even though very few people throughout history have received a calling from God as dramatic and miraculous as these characters, Christians DO believe that everyone who is spiritually alive and vital and everyone who actually knows God does have a calling from God, a divine vocation.

Martin Luther was very concerned that the Medieval Church had forgotten this truth and taught that only the clergy had a divine vocation. So, a great concern for Luther was to restore this sense of sacred calling NOT only to our jobs/work but to the whole life, a sense that God is calling us, calls us into RELATIONSHIP with Him and into this HOLY PARTNERSHIP or union with Him in His mission. If we can recover this, it really does change our occupation or job/relationships into something MUCH different, into a holy calling and something permeated with the Divine Presence and with meaning.

The truths that Moses was learning here are no better summarized than in what Jesus Christ in the Upper Room, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" i.e. work/life only becomes a calling as we connect to Him.

So let's look at this particular Call Narrative: A Two-part Call and A Two-part Crisis.

Moses left Egypt in a hurry (you'll remember). He was a Hebrew but raised as a Prince of Egypt right in the palace of the Pharaoh. And at about 40 years of age Moses saw the oppression of the Hebrew people (with new eyes)...and he reacted and retaliated and ended up murdering an Egyptian guard... And when the killing became public... the Pharaoh (who never did like that KID...Moses!), Pharaoh vowed to kill Moses that Israelite! And "The Prince of Egypt" became a fugitive in Midian...he married, settled down, became a shepherd and that was some 40 years ago... But during that time (misery/time) the oppressed Israelites cried out into the void ("is anyone OUT there?") and God sees, hears, knows the pain of this people.

And then, one day, Moses, pasturing the sheep leads the flock to Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai) ... before long he'll lead a very different flock to this same mountain. Amazing how his so-called secular job turned out to be a sacred preparation (You never know how a job can be used by God to shape you.)

And that's when there's a disturbance: a bush is on fire but not burning. And Moses was curious! It is a Divine Messenger, the "angel of the LORD", an expression of God's very presence. And the voice of God calls from the fire, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses answers to his name.

And the Israelite, Egyptian, the Prince who became a shepherd is told to come NO closer...and told to make himself weak and exposed by removing his shoes... "This is holy ground... I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

"And Moses hid his face and was afraid to look at God"... But this HOLY God answers with mercy and describes His plans to rescue the Israelites from their poverty, oppression and pain. And to bring them to a good land of their own, a land FLOWING with good things, milk and honey, a mother-land.

Now, just a few observations to this point. Moses doesn't seem to be looking for God...he's just doing his job. And in virtually all the "Call Narratives" this is also the case. God is the initiator. It's one characteristic of grace – it's NOT God responding to good, worthy or sincere people. God seeks and finds.

Second observation: Moses' response to this initial vocation or calling is...curiosity. "I should go over and look at this marvelous sight, why the bush isn't burned up"...And I'm not really sure what to make of this; I've HEARD that "curiosity killed the cat"...but ALSO, being so occupied that we don't notice and question and wonder at what's happening around us seems to be a real spiritual disability.

And then THIRD, when people really meet God and hear His call, what may start out as curiosity always leads to the deep awe. Rudolph Otto was a great German theologian (early 20th C) and he used the Latin phrase, "mysterium tremendum et fascinans", BOTH terrified and allured by God's other-ness, God's holiness. And this is one aspect common to all the Call Narratives.

That burning bush symbolizes this: just as the natural laws are apparently suspended in this scene (and Moses had better get used to that happening!); here's a FIRE that does not incinerate/destroy BUT SO ALSO, the spiritual and moral laws are ALSO apparently suspended. Moses, the murderer, the unholy fugitive is NOT consumed by the holiness of God – he's like a spaceship that flies directly into the sun but he doesn't burn up...

When God tells Moses in v. 8 "I have come down", it anticipates that moment in history when God came down in the perfect and ultimate way, when God became a Man in Jesus Christ. God identifies/enters IN. And in the Gospel we learn that it is ONLY because a great Mediator, our

Shield and Defender and Advocate – a great High Priest put Himself in our place (came down/entered IN) – this is why it’s possible for sinful people, like Moses and like you and I to actually encounter this Holy God and NOT be consumed. Our God is a consuming fire says the NT writer (Heb 12.29), but we are NOT consumed because Jesus Christ was entered IN to our place and now stands in the very presence of Holiness advocating Moses and us.

Now Moses’ call continues, a kind of second call and THIS too is typical in all the callings found in the Bible AND in the lives of modern, everyday people who actually hear and answer the calling of God.

As God is telling Moses of His gracious plans to come DOWN and save His enslaved people...all the plans must have been so wonderful for Moses to hear... and you can see his face...big excited smile...until verse 10, God says, “So, come now and I will send YOU...”

“Huh?...Who said anything about ME...what do I have to do with this...I mean I think it’s wonderful that YOU will plunder the bad Egyptians/Pharaoh and the milk and honey and all that...but what can I do?”

And in fact, the very first words Moses says after God’s announcement are, “Who am I? That I should go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

And THIS also is an essential component of a genuine meeting with God. He SWEARS grace to us; He awakens us to His unswerving commitment, His covenant (that’s why the repetition of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – God is going back to His promise!) and God begins to deeply convince us that because Jesus Christ has DONE it all, fulfilled OUR part of the agreement, that WE ARE RECEIVED! We are included in His good plans (like last week “His very great and precious promises” (2Pet 1.4) are OURS...) and nothing will change that – God has come down; God has done it; God will see complete the work...A N D (a second part)...there’s a PLACE/ROLE FOR US in God’s mission!

It’s NOT as if God is saying, “Moses, I did my part and now you have to do yours!” And it’s not as if God is saying that He needs help. But His coming DOWN to us is both to SAVE us and to INCLUDE us. This calling is all encompassing.

It’s as if...God finds us dead and spiritually insensitive...like a stone and then He turns the stone into a living thing and that living thing (the New Me) is somehow attached/grafted to Life Himself...and like a branch spliced into a LUSH and powerful Vine, I will bear fruit...I will participate in what God is doing... It’s an essential part of these Call Narratives and it ALSO applies to modern, everyday people who are called...just as it applied to Moses and Paul and Mary and Isaiah and everyone who has ever believed. It’s a call to COME ALIVE and it’s a CALL TO START LIVING, a RESCUE and an INCLUSION.

This is why that WONDERFUL image Jesus Christ used at the Last Supper is so engaging and instructive to us; from John's Gospel, chapter 15:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, neither can you, unless you remain in me."

We're engrafted into life and growth and fruit. .

It's like being invited to get on a bus and go to a stadium to some great sporting event...and as we get closer to the field someone comes up the aisle of the bus and distributes uniforms/equipment and it dawns on us... "Oh! I'm being invited NOT just to watch this EVENT but to participate!"

And in the same way that YOU might be shocked, to learn that you're playing in this game, Moses is just that stunned. It's a kind of spiritual crisis. And that's how I want to conclude today's sermon – the crisis for Moses and the crisis for YOU.

Moses has reasons why this isn't a good idea! What about Pharaoh? "Who am I to speak to the leader of this empire?" And what about the Israelites, "I have a bad reputation with them... What if they won't believe me, or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" (4.1)

And YOU too... you have your reasons... you have this sense of "Who? ME?"... Lord, you want ME to join in the MISSION OF GOD... to see my WORK, my daily routine as an arena for God's work in ME and God's work THROUGH me...that I'm not only balancing the books at this company and livin' for the weekend...NO! I'm balancing these books in order to help and bless people in the name of God... but really? Who ME?

I'm attempting to stay sexually pure in THIS present environment? WHO ME?

I'm called to be an agent of grace and truth in my family in my neighborhood/work? Who me?

I'm attempting to believe the Good News... that a Ragamuffin Rabbi who died on a Hill far away...and was apparently raised from the dead, to believe that THIS act will change the world...I'm gonna BELIEVE that and try to engender that same belief in MY children... in THIS present environment? Really? Who ME?

T.J. given my background/tendencies (if you only knew!) – it's amazing that I'm a functional adult! Who ME?

I'm going to leave my super-cozy American Privacy Cocoon and actually share my life, my time, my home, my thoughts/feelings, my resources with other people in a church – engaging with

people, with whom I have little in common (really only ONE thing – that we believe this Gospel) – to live in community with other Christians...You know how counter-cultural that is? ... Who ME?

Ya' know I continue to hear people say...maybe you've said it yourself, "God will never give you more than you can handle..."

I want you to know that's the exact opposite of what I believe... God will always give you more than you can handle and that's why WE join Moses in his crisis...a daily crisis...where we say, "LORD, this is more than I can handle..."

And God says, "Tell them 'I Am' sent you – the God who is THERE, the God of the Covenant, the God of your fathers – Abraham/Isaac/Jacob – the God who makes promises and keeps them! The God is WITH HIS PEOPLE – I AM HERE WITH YOU! I am Present! I have come down...IN Jesus Christ, I totally identified with you... He answered the Calling and He obeyed in YOUR PLACE – He said "Not My will but THINE be done..."

And when we cling to Him, when we have that daily crisis with Moses but more important WITH Jesus Christ...coming daily to that posture of humble (shoes-off) repentance and trust we hear Him say, Whoever remains in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (Joh 15.5)...but in Him I can answer a call that is simply beyond me.

He is the dynamic of His own demands...He answers the call FOR us and He answers the call IN us.

God keeps counseling Moses through the man's honest doubts...and God gives him signs and assurances and God repeats His grace and promises and guarantees... Until at last (in CRISIS!) Moses pleads, "I NEED You to find someone else!"

And THAT is when...Aslan begins to growl.

"Say what you want, Moses. Be open and honest about your doubts and fears and shortcomings... I will provide the help (like Aaron) but don't say 'no'...I will save My people and I HAVE CALLED YOU and will equip you ...but 'No' is simply NOT an option..."

We fall down and we get up...we fall down/we get up...we fall down... but we don't refuse to get up.

You think, I can't live the Christian life and you fail to see that God is PRESENT. He calls you to change, to do things you can't imagine yourself doing and yet as He promised to be PRESENT to Moses, He PROMISES to be THAT present to YOU! He has people and resources that you need

He LOVES us so much...(What Wondrous Love is This), if He did not stay aloof but gave His own Heart (Rom 8.32)...how will He not freely give you the lesser gifts so that the heirs of grace can answer His Call?