

Exodus 4:1-9

Introduction

It was two weeks ago, now, that we heard God speaking these words to Moses out of the burning bush:

- ✓ Exodus 3:16–18 — “Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” And they will listen to your voice...”

There’s something really big going on right here in these verses. Notice that there are three parties: *God, Moses, Israel*. Now when *God* appears to *Moses* in the burning bush, the point is not just the *appearance* (“I saw a burning bush”), but the communication of a *message*, a *word*, a *revelation* for the people of *Israel*. “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has *appeared* to me, *saying*...” It was God’s will that *Israel* listen to *Moses*’ voice, because the words that Moses spoke were to be the very words of *God* to them. That’s pretty big. That’s so big, in fact, that under any ordinary circumstances, the people of Israel not only would not, but *should not* believe Moses or listen to his voice. No one was more aware of this than Moses was.

I. Exodus 4:1 — Then Moses answered [God], “But behold, **they will not BELIEVE me or LISTEN to my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’**”

In other words: “You say that Israel will listen to my voice, but we both know they’ll never listen to *my* voice if they don’t believe I’m really speaking *for You!*” “And so far, I know of no reason why they should believe that You have ‘appeared to *me*.’” “I know of no reason why they should *believe* that the word *I* bring to them is the very word of *God*.”

Now, of course, Moses is right. Yes, he should have been content to leave these details to God, simply believing and trusting His word – but still, Moses is right. I quote again the commentator who points out that in the Scriptures, “incredible reports *based solely upon the claims of men* are *not* to be accepted.” (Durham; emphasis mine) But if Moses is right; then this is obviously no surprise to God. So what provision has God already made to convince *Israel* that He really had appeared to *Moses*, and that the words Moses was speaking really were the words of *God*?

II. Exodus 4:2–5 — The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— “**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.**”

At first, this may seem to us to be a bit “fantastical.” What do you think would happen if I said to someone today: “I believe God appeared to Moses, and spoke through him, because when Moses threw down his staff it turned into a snake, and when he picked the snake up by the tail, it turned back into a staff”? They might laugh! They might say, “But how do you know that really happened?” “And doesn’t that sound a bit strange and far-fetched anyway?” So what’s the answer to the skepticism and sometimes even the mockery of the world? Well, it’s really very simple – but it’s something many Christians miss.

The first thing that needs to be very clear is that this miracle is not intended to prove the existence of God because the existence of God, the Bible says, is *self*-evident (Rom. 1:18-23; Psalm 19). God never *stoops* to “proving” His existence, for His existence (His eternal power and divine nature) is already known by all. Therefore, any “proofs” of the existence of God are ultimately not only pointless, but absurd. The moment you try to prove the self-evident, you deny that it’s self-evident and make yourself a fool. So for God to offer any “proof” of His existence would be for Him to deny *Himself*.¹ This explains why the Bible begins without any argument at all: “In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth.” This is also what we see in Hebrews chapter eleven:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:6 — And without *faith* [not blind faith, but faith founded upon the revelation of the self-evident God] it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

But now we have to go a step further. When God tells Moses to perform this miracle for the people of Israel, He’s not just assuming Israel’s knowledge of His *existence*, but the knowledge of His existence specifically as “the God of *their fathers*, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” – the God, in fact, who said to Abraham four hundred years earlier: “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.” (Gen. 15:13-14; cf. 46:1-4; 50:24-26)

So you see, *if* we’ve already accepted by faith the self-evident truth that God exists, *and(!)* if this God has already revealed Himself to our fathers, then *what’s the big deal(!!!)* about believing that He could now appear to Moses *if He wanted to?*² When the world laughs, we ought to point out in love that it’s actually their mockery that is truly irrational and absurd. The only trick here is just to know whether *this God* did, or did not, really appear *to Moses*. Is the word that Moses speaks *really* the word of *God* – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? Only *now* are we ready to rightly understand the miracle of the staff, turned into a serpent, turned back into a staff.³

¹ The Baptist catechism asks: “Ought all men to believe there is a God?” and answers, “All men ought to believe there is a God, and it is their great sin and folly who do not.” The next answer affirms: “The light of nature in man, and the works of God plainly reveal there is a God.”

² Cf. Paul’s question to King Agrippa: “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8)

³ “By these signs Moses was installed as the servant of Jehovah, and furnished with divine power, with which he could and was to appear before the children of Israel and Pharaoh as the messenger of Jehovah. *The character of the three signs corresponded to this intention.*” (Keil; emphasis mine)

God specifically says that this miracle has been designed so that Israel will believe that He has appeared to Moses. That is to say: This miracle has been designed so that Israel will believe that the *message* Moses brings is really and truly a *message* from God (remember: God “appeared to Moses, *saying...*”). You see, if the miracles can somehow validate the *message*—the message *itself*—then, of course, the *messenger* is also validated. So how does the miracle of the staff, turned into a serpent, turned back into a staff, validate the *message* that Moses is bringing to the people? The chief god of the Egyptians during the time of Moses was called Amon Ra.⁴ And it just so happens that Amon Ra seems to have been almost always depicted with a serpent draped over the disc of the sun. It also “just so happens” that because the Pharaoh’s themselves were considered divine, they were sometimes depicted as if they themselves were Amon, with serpents draped over their head. Not only did the serpent represent Egypt’s gods and religion, it also represented Egypt’s political authority and power. So we naturally think of the serpent that the Pharaoh’s wore as a part of their “crown.” The serpent was a major symbol of Egyptian religion and power. So in light of all this, when God tells Moses to throw down his staff and that staff becomes a serpent, and then when God tells Moses to *catch the serpent by the tail* and that serpent becomes a staff again, the message is *clear!* The God whose name is Yahweh—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is sovereign over all the power and might of Egypt, and therefore, having “observed... what has been done to [the Israelites] in Egypt,” He is *able* to “bring [them] up out of the affliction of Egypt.”⁵ He is able to subdue the serpent, and render all the might of Egypt powerless before His servant, Moses. That’s what the miracle *means*. And so by validating the message that Moses brings, the miracle also validates Moses as the messenger – as one sent by God to speak the very *words* of *God*.

III. Exodus 4:6–8 — Again, the LORD said to [Moses], “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then God said, “Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. “**If they will not BELIEVE you,**” God said, “**or LISTEN to the voice of the first sign, they may BELIEVE the voice of the latter sign.**”

Once again, we need to ask this question: How does this miracle of Moses’ hand becoming leprous like snow, and then being restored again like the rest of his flesh – how does this miracle validate the *message* that Moses brings, the *message* that God is concerned about His people, and will now bring them up out of the affliction of Egypt? In the Bible, “leprosy” is a general reference to all sorts of different infectious skin diseases. In its more serious forms, leprosy was disgustingly repulsive and revolting in appearance, it was considered extremely difficult (Stuart), if not impossible to cure (Motyer; cf. Cassuto), it was considered a sign of the wrath and punishment of the gods, it was considered *highly* contagious (even if you touched someone who touched someone who had it), and so for all of these reasons leprosy was a dreaded terror in the ancient world. So you can imagine the shock, and fear, and sickening revulsion of Moses when

⁴ “Amun-Ra in this period (16th to 11th centuries BC) held the position of [transcendental](#), self-created [creator deity](#) ‘par excellence’ ... His position as King of Gods developed to the point of virtual [monotheism](#) where other gods became manifestations of him... In the [Hymn to Amun-Ra](#) he is described as ‘Lord of truth, father of the gods, maker of men, creator of all animals, Lord of things that are, creator of the staff of life.’” (Wikipedia)

⁵ Motyer; Enns; cf. Keil; contra VanGemeren

he pulled his own hand out of his own cloak and it was leprous like snow! The point probably isn't that his skin was white like the color of snow (though that *could* be), but rather that there were "scales" of rotting skin "which rubbed off the surface of [his hand] like flakes of snow."⁶ Think of what Aaron said to Moses when the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy:

- ✓ Numbers 12:11–12 — Oh, my lord... let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.

In light of the description "leprous like snow," we have to assume that Moses' hand is now also in the advanced stages of rot and decay.⁷ His hand was probably *at least* as terrifying as the serpent – with the only difference being that you can't run from your own hand.

But what does it *mean*? God strikes Moses with leprosy *so that* He can *heal* him. "God said, 'Put your hand back inside your cloak.' So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, *behold*, it was restored like the rest of his flesh." Even more astonishing than the sudden appearance of the disease is the immediacy and the completeness of the cure! "Behold"! – The breathtaking power of God not only to inflict disease, but also to heal, and restore, and make whole again! Now as we've already seen, leprosy (in all of its many forms) was a dreaded terror in the ancient world – but apparently, this was especially the case in Egypt.⁸ In Deuteronomy 28, Moses speaks of "*all the diseases of Egypt*, of which [the Israelites] were afraid." (Deut. 28:58–60; cf. 28:15, 27) In Deuteronomy 7, Moses speaks of "*the evil diseases of Egypt*, which [Israel] knew." (Deut. 7:12, 15) And so we see again that when Moses takes his hand from his cloak and finds it *healed* and *restored* like the rest of his flesh, the *message* is clear. The God whose name is Yahweh—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is sovereign even over the dread diseases *of Egypt*, and so now He will "bring [His people] up out of the affliction of Egypt" so that He might be their Great Physician – the one who makes them *whole*.⁹ We read in Exodus 15:

- ✓ Exodus 15:26 — If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God... I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your *healer*.

Once again, we see that these miracles are not just supernatural marvels. They have powerful and beautiful *meaning*.

Notice what God says: "If they will not believe you... or listen to the *voice* of the first *sign*, they may believe the *voice* of the latter *sign*." What *we* have so far been calling miracles (or wonders), God calls "*signs*." (cf. 4:17, 28, 30) A sign is something that instructs, something that

⁶ cf. Stuart, referencing Hulse

⁷ "Any small or ordinary skin annoyance would hardly be of any 'sign' value for Moses to show to the people. It had to pose a greater threat to the life and health of Moses if the instantaneous cure was also to reflect the greatness and majesty of God's power." (VanGemeren)

⁸ In his comments on Deuteronomy 7, Craigie writes: "This reference to [the diseases of] Egypt is particularly apt for Moses' audience, for they and their parents would still have been able to remember the particular afflictions associated with that land. In ancient Egypt, such diseases as elephantiasis, various types of boils, and afflictions of the eyes and bowels were particularly common." (cf. Cassuto, referenced in Motyer)

⁹ Motyer; Enns; cf. Keil; contra VanGemeren

points us to a deeper meaning, something that sheds light on God's truth.¹⁰ So God's signs are *not always* miracles or wonders. Remember what God said to Moses in chapter three:

- ✓ Exodus 3:12 — I will be with you, and this shall be the *sign* for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.

When we looked at this verse, we saw how this sign instructed and shed its light on God's truth! Later on in Exodus, we read:

- ✓ Exodus 12:13 — The blood shall be a *sign* for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you...
- ✓ Exodus 31:13 — You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a *sign* between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.

In the same way, these miracles that God gives to Moses are intended to be *signs* – signs that actually *speak* and lead the people into God's *truth*. This is why God even speaks about “the *voice* of the first sign,” and “the *voice* of the latter sign.” The miracles are not just marvels intended to amaze, they are signs intended to teach and instruct. Calvin writes:

“Although the rod turned into a serpent could not speak, yet very loudly, indeed, did it announce, that what the Israelites deemed altogether impossible, would not be difficult to God... [God's] power cried out, or thundered in His miracles, to obtain a hearing for the teaching of His servant.”

And so God continues:

IV. Exodus 4:9 — “**If they will not BELIEVE even these two signs or LISTEN to your voice**, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

In verse eight, God said, “If they will not **believe YOU... or listen to the voice of the... SIGN[S]**.” Now God says, “If they will not **believe even these two SIGNS or listen to YOUR voice**.”

See how the voice of the signs and the voice of Moses are both intended to be communicating one and the same message! So what is the teaching of this third sign, and how does it validate the message that Moses brings?¹¹

¹⁰ See especially Motyer who is very helpful on this point.

¹¹ Almost all commentators (ff. Lange; Enns; Childs; Stuart; Durham; Motyer; Keil; Hamilton; Currid) connect this sign with the first plague when the water of the Nile River is turned into blood. If this is right, then the teaching of this third sign is once again God's power and sovereignty over Egypt (the Nile being the deified life-source of Egypt). However, as I point out above, we should not ignore the *differences* between the first plague and this third sign given to Moses. VanGemenen also observes: “In this third sign Moses was to take some water *from* the river (the first plague would later be performed *in* the Nile) and turn it into blood.” Enns and Childs (cf. Durham) both point out that this third miracle is not explicitly called a “sign.” They don't deny its value as a sign, but they use this point to buttress the “plague value” of the third sign as opposed to the first two signs. I would suggest that though the third miracle is not *explicitly* called a sign, this is *implicitly* and *obviously* assumed in the text (in equal measure

First of all, I think it's important to see the *difference* between this third sign and the first of the ten plagues. In the first plague, the Nile itself is turned into blood. But in this third sign, Moses takes some water *out of* the Nile and when he pours it "***on the dry ground***," it becomes blood "***on the dry ground***." So what does this *mean*? The blood "***on the dry ground***" is exposed and laid bare to the eyes of all. In Genesis chapter four, "The LORD said [to Cain]... 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'" (Gen. 4:10-11; cf. Num. 35:33; Heb. 12:24) And, of course, we know what Pharaoh had commanded: "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast *into the Nile*." (Exod. 1:22) So one commentator writes:

The Nile, which flowed with the blood of innocent Hebrew victims, would itself witness to its involuntary carnage with this miracle. Would the point of the 'sign' be wasted on any Hebrew...? Like Abel's blood that cried out from the ground, so would the infants' whose lives had been demanded by Pharaoh. (VanGemerer)

In this case, then, the message of the third sign is that God *sees*. God has observed the suffering of His people, and now He will judge and avenge their blood. (cf. Rev. 6:9-10) "The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, '***I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt***, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to... a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

Conclusion

The miracles that God gives Moses to perform are not just marvels intended to amaze, they're signs intended to teach and instruct. And so because the *message* of the miracles is *identical* to the *message* that Moses *speaks*, therefore Moses is authenticated as one who comes from God, and speaks the very *words* of *God*.

You see, in the Bible, the *signs* of a miracle worker can never truly be understood apart from the *message* that God has given him to proclaim, and that's what sets the miracles of the Bible apart from all other sorceries or magic tricks.¹² This explains why we no longer have "miracle

to the first two). Notice, too, that the first miracle is not called a sign until *after* the second miracle. Just as the first miracle was no less obviously a sign even before it was explicitly called a sign, so also is the third miracle. Hamilton points out that "there is no reversal with [the] third sign. Unlike the first two signs, which Moses then does before the people in chap. 4, the third sign remains on hold until a later time. (chap. 7)." With respect to the third sign's lack of "reversal," this is not only "logical" in and of itself, but it also makes complete sense in light of VanGemerer's explanation (see sermon). With respect to Hamilton's statement that the third sign was not performed before the people in chapter four, but remains on hold until the first plague in chapter seven, this is apparently patently untrue (see 4:30).

¹² VanGemerer writes: "God's prophets were accredited by 'signs and wonders' (cf. Deut 13:1-3) with the sole purpose of validating the messenger and the message—that both were truly from God. Accordingly, Moses was given a 'sign' to perform 'so that [*lema'an*] they may believe that the LORD ... has appeared to you' (v.5). There was to be no hint of the theatrical or circus mentality; this was to be no stunt or caper aimed at entertaining or building a personal following. The principle behind the miracles was to operate just as it did for the Zarephathite woman when Elijah raised her son from the dead in 1 Kings 17:24: 'Now I know that you are a man of God [= prophet] and that the word of the LORD [spoken] from your mouth is the truth.'" Childs points out that the first two signs [if not all three!] are "repeatable," but "the use of the sign... is clearly restricted. It functions to confirm the prophetic office and cannot be used indiscriminately."

workers” today (though God may still work miracles) – because with the ascension of Christ and the death of His Apostles, God’s revelation of His infallible and authoritative word to man is complete in the Scriptures. You see, as long as there are no more prophets bringing inspired revelation, there’s no more need for “miracle workers” to authenticate the giving of new revelation.¹³

For those *without faith* (such as Pharaoh and all his court, or even the Pharisees in Jesus’ day), the “signs” remain only in the category of “marvels” and “wonders” – things that can either be explained away, or simply ignored and rejected (cf. Exod. 4:21; 7:9; 11:9-10; Mat. 12:22-24). But for those of us who *by grace alone* have *already believed* the self-evident truth that the God of the Bible exists, and that He rewards those who seek Him— for us the signs and wonders that Moses performed wonderfully and powerfully *prove* that he was, indeed, a prophet sent *from God*. But now listen to what Moses himself says in Deuteronomy 18:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 18:15–18 — The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you...—*it is to him you shall listen*... the LORD said to me, “...I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”

Many long years after Moses died, an inspired editor of Deuteronomy could still write these words:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 34:10–11 — *There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses*, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him *for all the signs and the wonders* that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt.

But, of course, now we know that this prophet who was to come, *has* come – and His name is Jesus. (cf. John 6:14; Acts 7:37; Acts 3:22-24) Moses was the prophet and miracle worker who mediated the Old Covenant, but he was only a type of the greater Prophet and Miracle Worker who would mediate a New Covenant.¹⁴ So Peter says in his sermon on the day of Pentecost:

- ✓ Acts 2:22–24; 3:22, 24 — Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, *a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs*... this Jesus... God raised... up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Just like with Moses, the “mighty works and wonders” that Jesus performed in the Gospels were not intended to prove the existence of the God of the Bible—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—but rather to prove to all those who *have faith* that *this God is the one* who sent Jesus to speak *His words*, and even to *be His Word* to us. (cf. John 1:1) The mighty works that Jesus performed were not just “wonders,” they were “*signs*” – each one loudly proclaiming with its own “voice” the exact same message that Jesus spoke with His mouth. (cf. John 20:30-31) And so Jesus *is* our Savior and our Deliverer: who subdues and crushes the power of the serpent, who heals us of all our diseases, restoring us and making us whole, and

¹³ Cf. Chapter 8 in Sam Waldron’s book, “To be Continued: Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today?”

¹⁴ “As [Moses] was the first God-sent prophet, so was he also the first worker of miracles, and in this capacity a type of the Apostle of our profession, even the God-man, Christ Jesus.” (Keil) It’s true that God calls Abraham a prophet in Genesis 20:6-7, but Moses was the first prophet in the sense of one being “sent” out to speak for God.

who sees all our sufferings and promises that he *will* one day vindicate His people. *Jesus is* the final and ultimate Prophet *to whose voice we listen*, because even Moses, in the end, was speaking only, and always of Jesus. (cf. Luke 24:27; John 5:46) Even the miracles of Moses, in the end, were testifying of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, are you listening today, only to Jesus? It's *His* voice that speaks throughout *all* of Scripture. (cf. Rev. 19:10) Is it *His voice* that you are obeying *in all things* – in *every part* of your life? Are you truly living in light of the reality that His Word to us *is, indeed, the very Word of God*? Moses said:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 18:15–19 — The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you...—*it is to him you shall listen*... the LORD said to me, "...I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him."

And Jesus said:

- ✓ Matthew 7:24–27 — "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was [its] fall."

Are *you* listening only to His words, and building your house on the rock?