

1

God Speaks to His People

► **IN FOCUS**

God loves us enough to speak to us.

► **THE PASSAGE**

Exodus 3:1-6, 11-15; 4:28-31

LOOK AT OUR WORLD

Many people who believe in the existence of God assume God is distant and uninvolved in their day-to-day lives. Even Christians can fall prey to this thinking when they think their prayers are unheard and unanswered. But God does care, and in His timing, He speaks to us with a plan that is best for us.

► THE SETTING

Moses had led a roller coaster life. He was born to Hebrew parents who lived in slavery in Egypt, was spared death as a baby by being adopted by an Egyptian princess, and was raised with the privileges of royalty. Yet because the princess unwittingly selected his own mother as his nursemaid, he also learned about the Lord God of Israel. He was a product of two worlds: Egyptian privilege and an awareness of Hebrew suffering, paganism and the worship of the one true Lord God.

His dual background created a major problem for him. He intervened in one incident to alleviate the abuse of a Hebrew slave by an Egyptian overseer. Moses's action resulted in the death of the Egyptian; thus, he fled Egypt for his own safety. He went to Midian, where he took a wife, had a son, and went to work shepherding his father-in-law's sheep. The privileged prince became a simple shepherd. The change may have seemed like a demotion. Not so, for God would use these events to prepare Moses for a monumental calling.

LEARN GOD'S WAY

► EXODUS 3:1-6

*How did the situations in Moses's life prepare him for a calling from God? What phenomenon did the Lord use to initiate this conversation with Moses? What became more important than the burning bush that would not be consumed? Why did the Lord call Moses by name two times? What instructions did the Lord give to Moses? What does **holy** mean in reference to God?*

Meanwhile, Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² Then

the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire within a bush. As Moses looked, he saw that the bush was on fire but was not consumed. ³ So Moses thought, “I must go over and look at this remarkable sight. Why isn’t the bush burning up?” ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called out to him from the bush, “Moses, Moses!” “Here I am,” he answered. ⁵ “Do not come closer,” he said. “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ Then he continued, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

God takes the initiative. The day described in these verses may have started as an ordinary day. **Meanwhile, Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law Jethro**, meandering in a wilderness land to provide the best for the sheep under his care. He may have felt captive to the routine of life, doing the same thing day after day. Perhaps Moses thought about his past—on what could have been, on the horror of murder, on the anger of the Pharaoh. Moses may not have known that the Pharaoh had died (2:23). Therefore, if Moses was still living in fear, it was a fear without a reason.

Now was supplied by the translators to connect the narrative beginning in chapter 3 with the conclusion of chapter 2. The passage begins with *Meanwhile*, which suggests that something else was going on. Life does not happen in a vacuum. When God is at work He is not limited to one time, one place, one people, or one event. The Israelites in Egypt still suffered under the burden of their servitude. They “sighed;” “they cried” under the weight of it all (v. 23). However, their cries were not in vain. “God heard,” “remembered,” and “looked” upon them (v. 24). Without their realizing it, miles away, God was acting on their behalf.

Moses had **led the flock to the far side of the wilderness**. *Far side* is rendered “backside” in the KJV, and “west side” in ESV. Either denotes he had gone deeper into the “wilderness” (ESV, NIV) of the region. *Desert or wilderness* refers to an uninhabited area.

There, Moses **came to Horeb, the mountain of God**. *Horeb* is another name for Mount Sinai, a site that would have momentous meaning to Israel in their future. Later it would be the place where they would receive the commandments from God and a place where the Lord would continue to reveal Himself to them with power and purpose. That is why the place was called *the mountain of God*.

Other peoples who dwelt in the land considered the mountains to be a habitation of the gods. Horeb may have already had a reputation as a sacred site. Perhaps Moses was familiar with the mountain through his father-in-law, Jethro, **the priest of Midian**. We do not explicitly know just what god or gods he served. However, in Exodus 18:11, Jethro declared, “I know that the LORD is greater than all gods.” Whether this was a declaration based on personal experience or from his observation of Moses and the Lord’s interaction with Israel is not stated.

In a phenomenal way, what may have been considered a sacred site to many became a holy place for Moses. He saw a **the bush was on fire but was not consumed**. He was drawn to it, initially to satisfy his curiosity. **I must go over and look at this remarkable sight. Why isn’t the bush burning up?** “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up” (NIV). He knew what he saw was not natural or normal. That which is burning should eventually be destroyed by the flames. That was not the situation here.

Some Bible interpreters have tried to explain the phenomenon as a vision. Others say the bush was reflecting the sun in such a way that it appeared to be burning or that the pigmentation in the bush’s leaves issued a color that from a distance looked like flames. Why not just accept the phenomenon as the text describes: *the bush was on fire but was not consumed*. The Creator God who established the laws of nature can suspend them at His will.

As the narrative continues, the question about the burning bush loses its relevance, even to Moses. The bush was not the issue. It was a vehicle to get Moses’s attention. What really mattered was that **the angel of the LORD appeared to him** through this spectacular event, through **a flame of fire within a bush**.

The Hebrew word for *angel* means “messenger.” It is used both in reference to divine and human messengers. When joined with *of the Lord*, it refers to a manifestation of the Lord Himself. As the narrative continues, God is the One who spoke. The conversation was between Moses and God (the LORD; Yahweh) thus making it clear that *the angel of the Lord* was a self-revelation of the Lord God Himself, not the appearance of some other divine entity or heavenly attendant.

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look at the bush that had captured his attention, **God called out to him from the bush**. Again, notice that from this point on Moses did not demonstrate any interest in the burning bush itself, for the encounter with the Lord that occurred through it overwhelmed him. This is what we learn from this encounter between the Lord and Moses: we must not be so attracted to the phenomenon that we miss the revelation. The call to Moses was at God’s initiative. **Moses, Moses** is one of at least four times in the Old Testament where God repeats an individual’s name in speaking to that person. God called out *Moses*, to get his personal attention, then said Moses again to stress the urgency of the moment.

Moses replied, **Here I am**. With this reply, Moses affirmed his attentiveness which would set the stage for his availability. Then God immediately made it clear this would not be a conversation among equals. He warned Moses not to approach the encounter casually. **Do not come closer**. The unholy has no inherent right to barge into the presence of the Holy One. **Remove the sandals from your feet**, a symbol of an attitude of reverence. **For the place where you are standing is holy ground**.

The biblical concept of being *holy* is exclusively an attribute of the Lord God. It is not a trait inherent in or even natural to human-kind except in relationship to the Lord. *Holy* at its root means “to be sanctified, set aside, or separated,” in this case, unto the Lord. The *ground* where Moses stood was not holy as if the ground a few steps away was not holy. Neither was it holy because of the phenomenon of the bush. The moment and the place took on the character of holiness because of the presence of the Holy God. He is what makes any time in our lives and any place in our lives

holy. No time is holy because we declare it so; neither is a place holy because we construct it to be. Because holiness is an attribute of God, whenever and wherever we meet Him, we confront His holiness and must respond accordingly.

Verse 6 adds some details essential for our study. Appropriately, “Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.” God gave Moses a preliminary introduction. “I am the God of your father.” Perhaps this is a reference to Moses’s own father (Amram, Ex. 6:18-20) who influenced young Moses. “I am . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” An association with these generational and spiritual forebears would be significant in identifying this One not as a new god or another god but as the God of Israel’s heritage. The God who made Himself known in the past continued to reveal Himself to a new generation. He continued to act to fulfill His promise to establish a covenant people through whom all peoples of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

What are a few lasting lessons that come from Exodus 3:1-5?

- From the beginning, the Lord has taken the initiative to make Himself known to His people.
- When God speaks, we are to turn our attention toward Him.
- God is holy, an attribute we are not to overlook even while we experience the blessing of an encounter with Him.
- Every encounter with the Lord has the potential to bring about change in our lives.

► EXODUS 3:11-15

What was the first question Moses raised with the Lord in response to God’s call? How did God answer him? What sign did He give to Moses? What was the second question Moses asked? What is God’s personal name and what does it mean about His nature, His being?

¹¹ But Moses asked God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹² He

answered, **“I will certainly be with you, and this will be the sign to you that I am the one who sent you: when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will all worship God at this mountain.”**¹³ Then Moses asked God, **“If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I tell them?”**¹⁴ God replied to Moses, **“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.”**¹⁵ God also said to Moses, **“Say this to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation.**

Listen when God speaks. In verses 7-10, God informed Moses that He was aware of the suffering His people were enduring because of the oppressive regime in Egypt. He declared He had come down to rescue them, to set His people free. Moses would be His servant to accomplish God’s intent. The assignment was not optional; it was a mandate. Moses’s fear or hesitancy should have been overcome by the declaration, “I am sending you” (v. 10). Apparently, it was not, for from this point through Exodus 4:17, much of the conversation consists of Moses asking questions, offering excuses for why he was not the right person for the assignment, and God’s responses to him. In verse 6, we were told Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. Whatever fear Moses had of God seems to have subsided. He appeared to have been more afraid of the Pharaoh and the assignment than He was of God.

Moses asked, **Who am I?** In other words, “Why Me?” What is my authority **that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?** The question was a plea for assurance. God did not ignore the question, but the answer He gave may not have been what Moses was looking for. In essence God replied, “Why you, Moses? Because I have chosen you.” What greater authority did Moses need? And what greater assurance than the promise of God, **I will certainly be with you?**

And this will be the sign to you that I am the one who sent you. God would confirm His calling and promise with a *token*

or sign. Well, sort of. **When you bring the people out of Egypt, you will all worship God at this mountain.** Moses would know the certainty of the call and be assured of the success of the task only when it was completed and the people assembled at this very mountain location. Moses may have wanted a reassuring sign *before* he began. God desired a response of faith that would carry Moses through to the end. One thing Moses could know for sure—God promised Himself. *I will certainly be with you.* This was not a single-situation sign but an ongoing one. No doubt Moses faced other situations where he held on to that promise. You and I too have faced situations where we were encouraged by that same promise. Thereby, we also can overcome our reluctance by trusting the call and promises of God.

Moses then raised another question, **If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I tell them?** The essence of this question is, “Who are You?” Did Moses not know to whom he was speaking? Was the question just to secure a name, something to call God, or was he wanting to know something more about the character of God? Moses had been raised with an awareness of the God of Israel. Now what he knew about the Lord was being tested in a crucible of life. He was about to learn more than information about the Lord; he was to get to know Him in a personal way.

In the Old Testament, to know someone’s name was to know something about their nature and character, which also implied a sense of control over the person. You recall that Jacob and Manoah made similar inquiries (Gen. 32:29; Judg. 13:17). In those cases, the Lord provided no answer. Not so with Moses. God not only gave him a direct answer but a personal answer, as if He wanted to make full disclosure of Himself to Moses, so he would be well-equipped to reply to the Israelites.

God replied to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you. The Hebrew verbal phrase is derived from the verb “to be” and may also be translated “I AM BECAUSE I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE,” among other options. God reduced the name to *I AM* which in Hebrew is

rendered as *Yahweh*, a third person form of the Hebrew verb “to be,” which could be understood by the people to mean “He Is.”

Yahweh is translated LORD in many English translations. In the Hebrew text the name God gave Moses consists of only four constants: YHWH. No one knows for certain how to translate or say it. Jewish readers considered the name so sacred they would not attempt to say it. They substituted the Hebrew word for *lord* (*adonai*). The King James translators as well as translators of several other Bible translations continued the practice of substituting the word *lord* in place of YHWH. To distinguish the personal name of God from other typical uses of the word *lord*, the translators used all small capital letters; thus, the rendering “the LORD.”

In addition, you may have read a translation or heard a reference to God as *Jehovah*. This name, which is not a real Hebrew word, resulted when some Bible translators combined the Hebrew constants YHWH with the vowels in the Hebrew word *adonai*.

Furthermore, Moses was to tell the people the Lord was not a new God. He was **The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob**. Just as God used this wording with Moses (v. 6) to show the continuity of His work in history, Moses was to use this same name to communicate a similar message to the Israelites. The Lord of the past was at work in the present to give them a future.

God makes two other comments about His name. **This is my name for ever**. Here is another affirmation about who He is: He always will be. He does not change; He does not act on a whim. He is constant and dependable. He makes a divine commitment to be part of their lives as a participant in their story forever. Then He added, **this is how I am to be remembered in every generation**. The people were to know Him, remember Him, and obey Him for who He is as the Lord God, the *I AM*. He was not only part of their history, but He was also part of the story they were to communicate to the generations to come.

What are a few lasting lessons that come from Exodus 3:11-15?

- The Lord reveals Himself that we may know Him and, in knowing Him, that we will submit to His holy purpose.

- The ability to do what God calls us to do is dependent not on who we are but who God is.
- The Lord promises His presence; He demands our faith.
- Before we can speak in God's name, we must know Him.
- God revealed His personal name as I Am, the One who is, and is to be. He is the Eternal One, the same for all generations.

► EXODUS 4:28-31

What was the subject of the conversation Moses had with Aaron when they met together? What actions did Moses and Aaron take in obedience to what they had been told? How did the people respond? What did they believe? Upon believing, what did the people do?

²⁸ Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and about all the signs he had commanded him to do. ²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰ Aaron repeated everything the LORD had said to Moses and performed the signs before the people. ³¹ The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD had paid attention to them and that he had seen their misery, they knelt low and worshiped

Believe and do what God says. The dialog between Moses and the Lord continued with Moses raising objections or excuses for not proceeding with the assignment. God had answers for them all. He also informed Moses that his brother, Aaron, was coming to see him and would partner with him in going to Egypt to speak to the Pharaoh and lead the Israelites into freedom (3:16–4:17). Finally convinced, Moses took leave of Jethro, gathered his family, and prepared to journey back to Egypt. Just as the Lord had indicated, Aaron came to meet Moses at the “mountain of God.” (4:27). Their union was warm, as you might expect between two brothers who had been separated for so long. We can only wonder about the details as they talked about how the Lord had brought them together at this place and for this divine purpose.

Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say. He gave an account of what the Lord had told him to say to the Pharaoh once they arrived in Egypt. He also recounted **all the signs he** [the Lord] **had commanded him to do.** He described the actions he was to take in establishing his authority before Pharaoh and his credibility before the people (4:1-9).

Once they arrived in Egypt, **Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites.** *Elders* would denote those of influence either because of age or some leadership hierarchy the Israelites had established among themselves. **Aaron**, as the spokesman the Lord had promised him to be, **repeated everything the LORD had said to Moses.** Notice the message is consistent and the content is what the Lord had made known. But Moses and Aaron did not limit their audience just to the elders but to all the people of Israel. And either Moses or Aaron **performed the signs before the people.** As stated previously, the *signs* were to establish credibility with the people.

The people believed. The wording may imply that initially the people did not believe, but eventually in response to what they heard and saw, they did believe. They heard two important truths about the Lord God. **The LORD had paid attention to them.** Moreover, **he had seen their misery.** He was fully aware of their suffering (2:23-25). Having heard their cries and knowing of their affliction, the Lord prepared a way of escape and relief.

Then they bowed their heads and worshiped. Belief led to worship, as it should. Bowing the head or kneeling low was a display of deference and respect. Worship is a declaration of worth and adoration. The people came before their awesome Lord God with humility to give praise to Him for all He had done and was about to do.

What are a few lasting lessons that come from Exodus 4:28-31?

- As believers we declare the message and take the actions the Lord has made known.
- Each believer has a calling from the Lord and is equipped to carry it out according to His will and purpose.

- The message from the Lord is powerful in its effect, leading people to believe and worship the Lord who is its source.
- We recognize what the Lord has done and is doing, and respond with adoration and praise.

LIVE IT OUT

The writer of Hebrews reminded his readers that God had spoken to His people in many ways with the zenith of His revelation being through His Son, Jesus (1:1-2). Jesus declared that He would send the Holy Spirit to those who believe. The Spirit would continue to reveal the truth of the Lord (John 16:7-13). God still speaks to His people in countless ways, through His Word, His Son, and His Spirit. No matter what stage of life, God still calls, He still has work to be done. Therefore, listen for His voice. Respond in obedience to what He makes known. He will be glorified, and all who trust and obey will be blessed.

Examine the landscape of your life. Identify the places, the circumstances, the ways the Lord God has revealed Himself to you, called out to you. Consider how those holy encounters changed your life, both in the sense of helping you overcome a burden of the past and preparing you for the future.

What is the most challenging thing God has called you to do?

What reasons or excuses did you offer for not accepting the assignment?

What changed your mind?

In what ways did you find assurance that the call was of God?

NOTES