

THE CALL OF MOSES

Exodus 3:1-4:17

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This is the third message in a series on the Gospel According to Exodus. The good news of Exodus is not only that we're saved *from* death and sin, but also that we're saved *to* God *for* the sake of the world. This is a theme that is repeated throughout the Bible, including the New Testament. In fact, St. Peter was very likely meditating on Exodus when he wrote:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." 1 Peter 2:9 ESV

Peter describes the same threefold calling we've seen in the Gospel according to Exodus: we're called 1) *from* (out of) darkness, 2) (in) *to* God's marvelous light, 3) *for* proclaiming the excellencies of the Lord as his royal priesthood. What makes this such good news (i.e. Gospel) is that it's a triple blessing: We're delivered from slavery and death! We're embraced by our heavenly Father! And he gives us strategic responsibilities in his kingdom!

But what if, like Jonah of old, God calls you to a place like Iraq? Think of what Canon Andrew White, aka the "Vicar of Baghdad," says: "People say to me, 'Andrew, when you go back to Iraq, do take care.' But I say to them, 'That's silly. How can I take care in Baghdad? I don't take care, I take risks.'"

The truth is that, no matter where God sends you, no matter what your role in his kingdom, it's going to be risky. Following Jesus is never without risks, because the best things in life generally come from risk-taking. For example:

- It's a risk to try to learn and become proficient at something, whether an instrument, or a trade, or a thesis topic. You could fail.
- It's a risk to apply for a job or to ask for a raise. You could fail.
- It's a risk to open yourself up to new friends. They could reject you.

How do we know what risks to take and what not to take? Where can we turn in the Bible for a good example of how to trust God and take a giant leap of faith? Anywhere but Exodus 3-4, which is without question one of the most frustrating passages in the Bible. Reading Moses' stubborn and cowardly refusal of God's calling is pretty discouraging.

But to be honest, if I had been in Moses' shoes, I would have been more than a little afraid to go back to Egypt. Like Jonah, I wouldn't want to go to ancient Ninevah. Unlike Canon White, I prefer to take care rather than take risks. I certainly wouldn't want to be the Vicar of Baghdad. If God asked me, I might be like Moses and say, "Here I am, Lord. Send Aaron."

Where can we turn in the Bible for a good example of God's patience and kindness for risk averse people like you and me? As we'll see in the following study of Exodus 3-4, it's a great passage for learning how to find our security in the Lord.

GOD CALLS US TO HIMSELF BEFORE HE SENDS US ON A RISKY MISSION. EXODUS 3:1-10.

The good news of Exodus is that we're saved *from* sin and destruction *to* God *for* the sake of the world. Moses' life story follows this pattern. In Exodus 2, Moses was saved from death when he floated in his little ark down the Nile into the arms of an Egyptian princess.

But was Moses saved *to* the gods of Egypt *for* the kingdom of Egypt? No. When Moses became an adult, he rejected the privilege and wealth of royalty and instead chose to side with the Hebrew people, to fulfill his destiny as their deliverer. Yet at the moment of his ascendancy, one of his Hebrew kinsmen challenged him saying, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?" If Moses had already drawn near to the Lord at that time, then he would have been able to give the man an answer. But Moses still hadn't met the Lord. Consequently, he was shocked by opposition from his own people. Having committed treason against Pharaoh, Moses had to flee for his life from Egypt, leaving behind both the life of royalty that he had lived within the family of Pharaoh, and also what he understood to be his destiny as Israel's deliverer.

Working as a shepherd in the wilderness, Moses had a lifetime to think over what went wrong. How had he miscalculated? Did he have the right vision but the wrong tactics? Or was he simply an arrogant fool to think that he could save the Israelites?

It's not that Moses hadn't correctly discerned his calling. It's just that he hadn't yet drawn near *to* the Lord. He had to be delivered *to* God before he could become the deliverer of Israel. Why? Because he's not simply going to deliver the Israelites *from* Egypt. A day is coming when Moses will bring the Hebrew people *to* God *for* the sake of the world. They will come out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai, where the Lord will descend like fire upon the mountain, and God will call them all to himself as a kingdom of priests for the sake of the world (Exodus 19). That's why Moses has to meet God first. He can't lead them to God if he hasn't yet met the Lord himself.

Exodus 3 opens with Moses driving his sheep up to the Horeb region and the foot of Mt Sinai, and he sees there a burning bush. There's a word play happening in the Hebrew text, as bush (*seneh*) sounds similar to Sinai. God will soon set Sinai ablaze to introduce himself to an entire nation. In anticipation of that great burning *Sinai*, Moses meets God at a burning *seneh*. Moses must take off his filthy shepherd shoes and consecrate himself to meet God at this little Sinai, just as all the people will have to do when they come to Sinai.

After years of shepherding and rethinking his life in the wilderness, the Lord appeared to Moses at the foot of Mt Sinai. There at the burning bush, God (v 6) introduces himself to Moses as the God of his fathers. Then (vv 7-9) he expresses concern for the Israelites back in Egypt and his desire to free them. And finally (v 10), he tells Moses not to take care, but to take a risk:

Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt. Exodus 3:10 ESV

It's finally time for Moses' mission. Now that Moses has met the Lord, he's ready to deliver his kinsmen *from* Pharaoh, *to* God, *for* the sake of the world. God doesn't give Moses this risky mission until he first draws Moses to himself. Likewise, God doesn't want to send us out until he's brought us in to himself. We're no good as representatives of the kingdom if we don't know the king.

After so many years in the wilderness, one would think that Moses would be overjoyed to have this calling, finally to be able to do what he had long believed was his destiny. But Moses wasn't happy at all....

THE ANSWER IS: I AM WITH YOU. EXODUS 3:11-4:12

Over the next twenty-four verses, Moses pushes back against God's call with four objections. It's one of the longer conversations with God recorded in the Bible. The fact that Moses says anything other than, "Yes, my Lord," tells us that he's either very brave or very foolish. We want to remember Moses as being very brave, but the more he talks, the more embarrassing it gets. After suffering rejection as a younger man, Moses can't let go of his hurt. It shows, not only in the way that he keeps asking the same question over and over again, but also in the way that he keeps missing what God says in reply.

Moses' first objection.

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Exodus 3:11 ESV

Do you remember the time not so long ago when presidential candidates who had been of age during the Viet Nam War had to convince the public that they weren't draft dodgers or had used their influence to avoid combat? Otherwise, they were rejected by the people. I suspect Moses felt similarly disqualified, because of his deliverance from death as a child. Unlike the rest of his generation, Moses dodged drowning in the Nile, and instead was adopted into Egypt's royal family (Exodus 2).

When Moses first tried to deliver his people, he had no authority, either over Egypt or Israel. So his kinsman rebuked him for it, asking "*Who made you a ruler and judge over us?*" It was a legitimate question for a new leader, in order to determine his authority.

Now God is giving Moses the authority to lead, but Moses doesn't want it. So he bends the question back onto himself. It's no longer "Who is your authority?" but instead "What's wrong with me?" Moses had been stewing for forty years over his prior rejection. He'd internalized it, making it all about himself.

God's answer to Moses' objection is telling. God doesn't coddle Moses saying, "Cheer up, buddy. You can do this! You're great with sheep!" Rather:

He said, "But 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." Exodus 3:12 ESV

In the Hebrew text God said, "But I AM with you." Compare this verse with God's second reply to Moses, where he says in 3:14, "I AM who I am." The first word in each answer is the same verb, which can be translated as either "I am" or "I will be." It's important to see that God's answer remains essentially the same throughout this entire section. God keeps saying, "I AM the answer."

Here's why this is important: Moses is depressed and despairing his own call, because he's operating out of his own insecurities. For this reason, he can't help but make every question about himself. However, if the problem we hope to solve is our own insecurity, we'll never solve it by looking within ourselves. We have to find security elsewhere. We need a rock and a strong tower, a mighty fortress that stands firm against the attacks of every enemy. Where better to find that kind of security than the Lord himself? We will always have insecurities apart from the Lord. But when the Lord is with us, why should we be afraid?

God's answer to Moses' insecurities isn't to coddle him, but rather to assure him that Almighty God is with him. And just to prove that he's with Moses, God says in 3:12, "I'll meet you back here at Sinai after you've led the people out."

In summary, Moses' first objection is: "Not me; I'm not good enough." God says, "I AM the answer. I AM is with you. I AM your risk insurance. Any further questions?"

Moses' second objection. But apparently Moses found God's reply inadequate. In Exodus 3:13, Moses introduces his second objection, which I might paraphrase this way:

"I've already tried delivering them once and it didn't go well at all. The last time I went to deliver them, they asked, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' So, if I were to go back to them, they would surely ask me this question again. And they'd probably want to know if I even know your name?' What then?"

In vv 14-22, God reiterates his answer to Moses' previous question, and he unpacks it in three ways: in terms of his existence, his presence, and his deliverance.

First, God exists, and is the fountain of all existence. In v 14 God says, "I AM who I am," and "tell the Israelites that 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Then in v. 15 he tells Moses his name: "The

LORD.”¹ Both “I AM” and “The LORD” are simply variations on the most common verb of all, *to be*. So the first and most important thing God is disclosing to Moses about himself is that, unlike all the dead idols of Egypt, God is alive. God exists and is the source of all existence.

Second, God is present with Moses. In vv 15-16, God goes on to reaffirm his commitment to his people by disclosing that he is the “God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This is the fourth time God says this same formula since Exodus 2:23-25, when God came into the foreground of the story and he “remembered” his covenant. The main idea of the covenant between God and his people is intimate relationship, expressed elsewhere like this: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”² And like this: “Where you go I will go.”³ Because of the covenant, God is present with Moses and his people.

Third, God is for his people and will deliver them from Egypt to himself. In vv 17-22, God reiterates his plan to rescue his people from slavery and draw them to himself in the wilderness. In v 18, God says that the Hebrews will listen to Moses (in spite of what Moses thinks and says to the contrary). However, v 19, Pharaoh won’t listen to Moses, so, v 20, God will unleash his wrath against Pharaoh, and as a result, vv 21-22, the Hebrews will plunder the Egyptians.

Each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. Exodus 3:22 ESV

This is a wonderful promise that shows God’s love for children. Later in Exodus, Pharaoh agrees to let the Hebrew men go out into the wilderness to worship God, so long as they leave the women and children behind. But for Moses, the idea of leaving behind the women and children is an abomination. No way will he leave them, because God has promised that the children will leave Egypt in splendor, just as Moses was delivered from death into a position of royalty. The Israelites will they plunder the Egyptians, and then they’ll strip off the tatters from their kids and dress them in gold and silver and fine fabrics for their departure. This is a sure sign of God’s love for the Israelites, and further proof of the three-fold Gospel according to Exodus. Not only will God rescue the children from death and slavery, but he will also restore their dignity by robbing them for worship as they come to meet him at the mountain.

In summary, Moses’ second objection is, “I’m afraid they’ll reject me.” In response, God says, “I AM the answer. I AM is with you, I AM is for you, and I AM will deliver you. I AM your risk insurance. Any further questions?”

Moses’ third objection.

Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” Exodus 4:1 ESV

¹ Most modern English translations use LORD (in small caps) to designate *Yahweh* in Hebrew. Older English translations rendered this word as *Jehovah*.

² Jeremiah 30:22.

³ Ruth 1:16.

In vv 2-9, God responds by giving Moses three *signs*. God calls them *signs* several times, and it's important that we see them this way. They're not tricks, to be performed by an illusionist. They're not the secret incantations of a wizard or the special powers of a superhero. They are *signs*, and as such they point to something else.

There isn't space to unpack and explore the significance of these three signs. They probably have to do with the gods of Egypt. They also probably have to do with different realms of the created order. But in any case, what God is doing with these signs is he's demonstrating his own power over Satan, sin, and life/death. As God sends Moses back into Egypt as his ambassador, he gives Moses a sacramental responsibility, to demonstrate God's presence through these special signs. Just like sacraments in the New Testament, these are outward signs of a spiritual reality. They aren't conclusive, they can be imitated, and they can be misunderstood. But for those who have eyes to see, they communicate God's presence and power.

In vv 2-5, Moses' staff can become a serpent, but Moses can pick it up again without being bitten. Whenever Moses uses this sign, he'll be demonstrating God's presence and God's power over Satan. In vv 6-8, Moses's hand can become leprous, and then be cleansed. Whenever Moses uses this sign, he'll be demonstrating God's presence and God's power over sin. And in v 9, Moses can turn the water of the Nile into blood. Whenever Moses uses this sign, he'll be demonstrating God's presence and his power over life and death (which is what the Nile symbolized to Egypt).

In summary, Moses third objection is: "But they *won't* believe me." In response, God says, "I AM the answer. I AM is with you, and I AM empowering you to show others that I AM with you. I AM your risk insurance. Any further question?"

Moses' fourth objection.

But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." Exodus 4:10 ESV

This fourth objection about being slow of speech and tongue is a clear sign that Moses is getting desperate. Some commentators have suggested that Moses may have had a speech impediment, but I find that very unlikely. Moses speaks three languages at this point: Hebrew, Egyptian, and whatever they spoke in the wilderness of Midian. In Acts 7, Steven describes Moses as being "mighty in word and deed." By the time we get to this fourth objection, Moses has been talking for a very long time with Almighty God. Do you really think that he's verbally challenged?

Once again, God doesn't reply with coddling, saying, "Oh, Moses, that's not true! You're actually a really gifted speaker. I love your style!" God doesn't say anything at all about Moses' abilities. Rather, in vv 11-12 he responds by asking a series of rhetorical questions: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Then he reiterates what he's been saying all along, that because the Lord is with him, Moses need not fear any danger or obstacle.

Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." Exodus 4:12 ESV

In summary, Moses fourth objection is: “Almighty God and Father, I beseech you in the name of all that is fair and right and just and true, that I am not, nor ever have been, gifted with the manner of eloquent speech. After having spoken with me at length, and having heard my manifold questions, do you not perceive now how outrageously slow-witted I am?” In reply, God says, “Baloney. I AM the answer. I AM your creator, and I AM giving you the words to say. I AM your risk insurance. Any further questions?”

Four objections, all of them pointing to Moses’ fear and inability. One consistent answer: I AM with you. For every question, the ultimate answer is I AM. Again, we’ll never find a solution to our own insecurities by looking within ourselves. Rather, it’s the Lord, and the Lord alone, who gives us security in a risky world.

HOW TO MAKE GOD ANGRY

The Bible teaches, again and again, that God is slow to anger.⁴ His natural disposition is to be gracious and merciful, rather than to respond in wrath. But even God has his limits, and finally Moses crosses the line:

But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses. Exodus 4:13-14 ESV

Up until now, even though Moses’ objections were increasingly lame, they were nevertheless legitimate. Moses wasn’t crazy. He had been rejected by at least one of his kinsmen, and he had committed treason against the Egyptian crown. Moses had good reason to raise his objections before the Lord. We can follow Moses’ example in this, i.e. in having the courage to ask God questions.

But now this fifth objection is different. Rather than raising some concern, and giving God the opportunity to address it, Moses flat-out doesn’t want to go. It comes down to a battle of wills: God vs Moses. And from God’s perspective, this isn’t fair. Moses isn’t giving him any more room for discussion. There’s nothing here to debate together. Moses has planted his staff in Midian, and has said “NO WAY. I will not go.” That’s why God finally gets angry with him.

Yet almost unbelievably, God still is gracious with Moses! He allows for Moses’ brother Aaron to become his lieutenant. This move may be helpful in the short-term, but it will have catastrophic consequences in the wilderness. As we’ll learn later in this series, Aaron won’t have the experience or backbone to say no to the idolatry of the golden calf.

For now, simply note that God gave Moses ample assurance, and even dramatic signs, of his presence in order to insure the success of his mission. Yet at the end of all God’s assurances, Moses simply refused to go. And that’s what made God angry.

⁴ Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Ps 103:8, 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3; *passim*.

When God calls us to go out as his kingdom ambassadors, and he gives us every assurance of his presence and favor, we mustn't give him excuses about our own inability. Our circumstances aren't relevant in light of God's goodness and power.

HOW TO MAKE GOD SMILE

As we make our way through Exodus, there's so much we can learn from Moses. He was one of the greatest leaders of all time. Yet as we've seen in Exodus 3-4, he was far from perfect. He dug in his heels and preferred to wallow in self-pity rather than follow God's calling.

But thanks be to God that when Jesus was born into our world, He didn't shrink back from God's calling. Rather, Jesus set his face deliberately toward Jerusalem and Mt. Calvary, where he gave himself freely as a sacrifice, once and for all, to rescue us *from* sin and death, *to* God, *for* the sake of the world. Jesus, the Great I AM, took the greatest risk of all, enduring God's wrath for our sin, in hopes that he might be resurrected into eternal life and fellowship with God. And indeed God did raise him from death, and draw him back to himself, and seat him at his right hand, so that the world made new might become his footstool.

God knows that we're afraid. God knows that we're riddled with insecurities. That's why he sent Jesus to be our deliverer. Jesus was afraid too. But he found perfect security with his Father, and in so doing fulfilled his calling as the savior of the world.

If you want to make God angry, simply put your foot down and tell him, "No, I just won't go."

But if you want to make God smile, then take care, by taking the best and easiest risk of all. Give the reins of your life to the Lord Jesus Christ. Make him your king, and see how it changes everything:

- You say, "I'm nobody." But through Jesus Christ, you can become a child of God.
- You say, "I'm afraid to go alone." But Jesus says, "Behold I am with you always, even to the end of time."
- You say, "I'm weak and powerless." But Jesus says, "In your weakness I am strong."
- You say, "I'm slow of speech and don't know what to say." But Jesus says, "Wherever you go, whomever you stand before, I will give you the words you will say."
- You say, "I'm afraid of what might happen to me." But Jesus says, "Fear not, for I will raise you up to everlasting life."

The best things in life come from taking risks. Make God smile by entrusting your life to his Son. There's never been a risk more worth taking.