

Special Series

the Call of God – Moses (1)

Prayer

We thank You gracious Lord, for the amazing truths we discover by reading Your Word. May all Your people value it and learn to use it as was intended; as the revelation of Your character and plan for this world, and as the spiritual reference point for all who seek the truth. Let us not be carried away with our own ideas, but inspired by all you have revealed through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray in silence; let the Lord fill you with His peace and give you the confidence to stand firm in all things.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the world of sport** *Pray against greed and idolatry, but pray that God will use sport for good within your society, wherever possible*
- *Give thanks to God for the gift of His Word, written and spoken*
- *Pray for small churches that struggle to sustain their local witness*

Meditation

The ways of the Lord are compassionate and His love is incomparable;

He focuses the minds of those who need to deal with bad debt,
He liberates those entrapped by life who have no sense of purpose,
He helps with the most difficult decisions taken in the work place,
He re-ignites passion in wounded marriages by nurturing true love,
He heals the hearts of parents and children, shattered by separation,
He re-envisions those who need to find hope to face the future,
He ministers to the pain of the aged when gripped by chronic illness,
He heals and purifies the spirit of those who know the hell of abuse:

He has faced the toughest pain, the Cross; and His victory is our strength.

Bible passage – Exodus 3:1-6

¹ As Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, he drove the flock through the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flaming fire which came from within a bush. He looked, and remarkably, although bush was burning, it was not consumed by the fire! ³ Moses thought, 'I must go over to see this incredible sight, and find out why the bush is not reduced to ashes.' ⁴ When the LORD saw that he was coming over to look, God called out to him from within the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' He answered; 'Here I am'. ⁵ God said, 'Stop coming closer! Take your sandals from off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶ He went on; 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'. Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Bible Study

Review

This is the beginning of one of the most important chapters of the Old Testament. Exodus 3 begins with the famous story of God's revelation of Himself to Moses, and the chapter continues beyond this to describe God's call to Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and set them free. The chapter begins with the famous incident in which Moses was called aside by God through the sight of a burning bush. This event completely changed Moses' life, and it altered the course of history of Israel, and ultimately of the whole world. The great act of God's deliverance of Israel, recorded in Exodus, stemmed from Moses' obedience to this call, and the personal relationship he subsequently had with the Lord.

At the beginning of the chapter, however, scripture does not paint a promising picture. Moses had spent half of his life as a pampered princeling in the court of Pharaoh and half of his life as a shepherd for his father-in-law (Ex 7:6,7); he was certainly not rich and had not gained wealth through his conversion to the life and faith of his forefathers. Then, in the course of his duties as a shepherd, Moses took Jethro's flock to Horeb, possibly part of a mountain range in the Sinai peninsula, though it is almost impossible to be certain about exactly which mountain is called 'Horeb' (see the main Bible study). Most scholars reckon 'Horeb' (as here) and 'Sinai' (as in Exodus 19 etc.) to be the same mountain, but whatever we think of this and wherever the mountain might be, God used it as a place to reveal Himself to Moses.

Moses then saw a burning bush. Now, the sight of a flaming bush in the desert has been the subject of intense speculation and attempts at rational explanation, as if it was merely some natural phenomenon. Such arguments are of little value. Even now, few people have spent as long as 40 years shepherding in the area as Moses had done, and he would have known the difference between what was impressively natural and what was not. He responded to the sight of the burning bush because what he saw was uniquely and mysteriously impressive, and he saw 'the angel of the Lord ... in a flame of fire'. Moses' natural instincts drew him to the sight, but God stopped him in his tracks and called out to him, 'Moses, Moses'. This was no picturesque bush flower, or beautiful sunset seen through the haze of a desert mountain, it was the voice of God speaking directly to Moses.

Moses was commanded by God to 'take your sandals from off your feet', and this was the first direct commandment God gave Moses; the instruction indicated that Moses should stop and worship. It was common in those days for people to remove items of clothing or shoes in order to worship, so Moses knew what was being asked of him. Throughout Genesis, the forefathers had worshipped the Lord wherever God had met them, and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had built altars and named places to remember these great events (see Gen 12:7; 13:18; 26:25 etc.). Moses' experience on Mount Horeb was just like this, but different. Previously, God had revealed Himself and His Covenant to the forefathers in order to guide them towards becoming a great nation; but now, God needed Moses to be obedient to Him by taking radical action on His behalf, and we will find out in the rest of chapter 3. At this, Moses felt the awesome power of God's presence, and he hid his face in fear (3:6).

Many years had passed since the time of the forefathers; depending upon which Old Testament passage you use, Moses lived between 200 and 500 years after them, but the exact time period between the two does not matter. We learned yesterday that the Israelites were in desperate need (2:25), and the time had come for God to save His people. Moses' task was to be God's servant and save His people; and for that, God needed him to be totally obedient. Our passage shows that Moses was now ready to hear God's call.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Moses and the Mountain of God
- Moses and the burning bush
- Coming into the presence of Almighty God

Going Deeper

Enormous amounts of time and energy have been spent on trying to locate the 'mountain of God', and the detailed text does give us some clues about location. This whole passage is full of symbolism; fire, commands, worship, but it is all focussed around the amazing call of God; 'Moses, Moses'. God previously had a fascinating relationship with some of the forefathers, but the contact He established with Moses was of a new order. It was a relationship which had to be strong enough to withstand the testing of many great events in the future!

Moses and the mountain of God

The more you look at this passage of Scripture, the more amazing it becomes. Moses left Egypt a prince, having discovered his origins and chosen to take the tough road of identifying with his downtrodden ancestors. After committing murder and escaping from Egypt (2:11-15), he found himself living a nomadic life in the spartan deserts regions of Sinai doing the one form of work most despised by the Egyptian culture from which he came; shepherding (Gen 36:32-34; 37:1-6)! Nevertheless, shepherding was the occupation of his forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and although it would have come as a shock to Moses at first, he spent forty years working at it, not even earning anything from it, as Jacob had done (Gen 30:37f.). Moses was still looking after his father-in-laws' sheep at the age of eighty!

So it was that Moses led his flock in search of pasture-lands on the mountain slopes of the Sinai range. Interestingly, the Hebrew text of verse 1 hides a small directional guide as to where the mountain might be. The phrase I have translated 'through the desert' (3:1) is more literally translated 'behind the desert'. This would not mean much to us, but to this day, the ancient Bedouin people, and probably the Midianites and other Semitic tribes from which they are descended, take their directional bearings from facing eastwards. This means that it is probable that the phrase means something like 'westwards', but there are too many presumptions about this to make it a direct translation. What this does indicate to us is that the range of mountains containing 'Horeb' could be on the western side of the Sinai Peninsula, which is where the traditional 'Jebel Musa' or 'Moses Mountain' is found to this day. Other sites have been suggested in the Middle East, but I am not convinced that any stronger arguments have been produced for anywhere other than the traditional site.

In the book of Exodus, this mountain is called Horeb in three places; here, at the 'striking of the rock' incident (17:6) and before the Israelites set off on their wanderings after worshipping at the mountain (33:6). The mountain is also called 'Sinai', but this name is used on the occasion of the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19,20), when Moses went 'up the mountain' (24:16), and other incidents around the giving of the first and second set of Commandments (31:18 and 34:2f.) The confusion has never helped, but most people have settled down to accept that we have another incidence of two names for the same place (as with the two names of Moses' father in law – Reuel and Jethro - see yesterday's study). There are similar numbers of references to both Horeb and Sinai in the rest of the Old Testament, notably the occasion when Elijah fled to Horeb in 1 Kings 19:8 to hide in a cave and find God.

Moses and the burning bush

The phrase the 'angel of the Lord' is another way of talking about the presence of God (3:2). Moses saw the fire coming from 'within' the bush and perceived something of the presence of God, and it was an entirely new revelation. From this point onwards in the Old Testament, God is described as like a fire, guiding the Israelites through the desert as a pillar of fire, for example (Ex 13:21 etc.), and also purifying the people of Israel (Malachi 3:2). Fire is a symbol of purity and holiness which represents God's opposition to sin and also his 'wrath', an image which continues into the New Testament (e.g. in the prophetic words of John the Baptist; Matt 3:10) eventually coming to be associated with the Holy Spirit, coming as 'fire' on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3). It is impossible for us to fully appreciate what Moses must have felt like, seeing God within fire, for the first time. The awesomeness of the experience captivated his attention, and he approached the fire.

Moses approached the burning bush (3:3) intent upon investigating the angel he saw in the fire; it was a brave thing to do! God needed a man who would not be afraid of anything, someone who had an enquiring mind and was prepared to investigate things. In his younger days, Moses had keenly felt the injustice of the sufferings of his people; now, God needed to know whether his senses and judgement had been dulled by the years. They had not, and the next verse clearly indicates that the Lord was looking for Moses to respond (3:4) before he took the next step.

God then called out to Moses by speaking his name two times; 'Moses, Moses'. This form of address is common in many cultures today, but in Scripture it was a term of endearment. The fact was that God was calling Moses not simply towards the Covenant established with his forefathers, but a personal relationship through which he would lead his people out of slavery. This was a new type of contact, of a kind we have not seen so far in the Old Testament. It is even possible to say that by expressing endearment in this way, God was expressing love towards Moses, and although God had always acted out of love for His people, this was the first time in Scripture that He expressed it in words directly to the person concerned.

God's call of Moses also points forward to other great 'calls' in the Old Testament. Samuel was called in a similar way, for example (1 Sam 3:4), and the theme of fire was strongly present in God's call of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1f.). Coming forward to the time of the New Testament, we find that Paul speaks of being 'called' to be an apostle (Romans 1:1 and many other places), and Christians in general are those who are 'called' according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). What we often forget is that Moses was the first person God

'called' in this way. God had been working in his life for some time, but in a moment which was God's timing alone he was called to respond; and he did, he said 'Here I am' (3:4)

Coming into the presence of Almighty God

The command of God came as soon as Moses responded; 'stop coming closer ...' (3:5). It was another test of Moses' obedience, as the Lord set boundaries about what Moses could do in his presence. God was holy and pure, and Moses was certainly a sinner (and a murderer). The command God then gave was probably well understood by Moses, who would have known that it required him to worship God; 'take your sandals from off your feet' (3:5). Sandals were usually taken off when entering the house of another person, either as a guest or as a servant on an errand, and it was normal for people to take their sandals off when coming into the presence of God; that is, into any place of His dwelling. For that reason, God said; '... the place where you are standing is holy ground.' (3:5). This should not be thought of as saying that the place on the mountain or the mountain itself was holy, only that God's presence at that place at that time made it holy. The rest of Scripture is clear in saying that the Lord God is present everywhere, and not to be identified exclusively with any place (despite his special attachment with the Temple in Jerusalem).

Later on in the story of Exodus, Moses was required to convey precise instructions to the people of Israel about what they should and should not do in order to offer acceptable worship to Almighty God. The beginnings of this lay in Moses' call, and from this point, Moses was clearly required by God to be obedient in every detail of what he did.

Lastly, God revealed Himself by word to Moses as the God of his Fathers (5:6). This was perhaps what Moses had been looking for all his life. He had sought his ancestry and paid the price of that with forty years of servitude. Now, God was calling him to a different form of service!

Application

This amazing story has a great deal to offer us because it is the first Scripture which identifies personal call, love, and faithful response as part of a relationship between God and His people. Alongside this relationship comes the responsibility to do what God requires, just as Moses had to be obedient to the Lord. The way that God's personal attention to Moses fits together with His requirement of obedience takes the idea of a personal relationship with God to a new level. Throughout Old Testament times, the people of Israel looked up to Moses and were in awe of the relationship he had with Almighty God, however, they did not fully appreciate that what God wanted was to have this kind of relationship with all people! In Christ, we are now in a place where we can have this personal relationship with God.

Reading the story of Moses, however, we are reminded that this personal relationship is not ours to do with as we wish, as some may think who have not been schooled into understanding the true Christian heritage of Scriptures. Our proper response to God is that of obedient worship and service, as symbolised in this passage by God's command to Moses to take off his sandals. We are also required to be obedient to every aspect of His call, for the Lord does not have a personal relationship with people for the sake of it. He has work to be done for the Kingdom, and He has made us to do this work. He calls us to be obedient to Him and do what He asks of us. Above all, He loves us, and longs for us to respond to His revelation.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Try to imagine the scene described in this passage. Discuss with your group the pictures that come to you.
2. Are the angel and God one and the same? If not, what are the differences; what does the angel do and why is he present?
3. Discuss within your group the significance of the 'holy ground' in verse 5. Is there such a thing as 'holy ground' today, and if so, where?

Topics covered by this text

- *Miracles*
- *The call of God*
- *Obedience to the call of God*

Personal comments by author

God showed love and understanding to Moses in this event, even though it is something we cannot easily spot. All of us need His love, and even a small hint of it can be enough to help us; just a few words that show a small degree of love can dramatically change a situation and make it better. Moses responded to God because he was addressed personally, and the Lord always calls us personally and with care, knowing how we will respond. There is no need for us to fear Him.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you read the story of someone's call? There are many books telling the story of people's call, and they can be helpful to read. If you have not read the life story of someone else, which describes how God has used them, then try and get hold of such a book and read it.*
- *Think carefully how you can best bring God's love into the different work and home situations in which you find yourself. It is not always easy, but sometimes, with God's help, just a few words will suffice!*

Final Prayer

Make us fruitful in Your Kingdom, Holy Lord, God of power and of might. May all we do contribute to the universal effort of all Your saints to bring Your Word of Salvation to all peoples, so that they may have a chance to hear the Good News presented in a reasonable and appealing way. Bless us in all our endeavours we pray: AMEN
