GOD CALLS MOSES

Exodus 3:1–4:17

Key Verse: 3:4

“When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’”

Do you ever wonder what your life is about? Does everything seem pretty random, or do you have a sense there’s something you’re supposed to be doing? Finding out what my life is about is such a big topic. At times, the busyness of life can even make this question seem impractical. But it’s so important. In today’s passage Moses has a profound encounter with God through which he discovers what his life is all about. We shouldn’t be expecting the same kind of epic experience. But there are lessons for us all in this calling of Moses. In this study we want to think about what these lessons are. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Exodus 3:1–4:17 is one unit. In it we find the record of how God calls Moses. It’s fascinating on a number of levels. There’s a burning bush, holy ground and the voice of God. It’s all so unexpected. There’s a staff becoming a snake, a leprous hand white as snow is suddenly healed, and water is turned to blood. Mainly there’s this dialogue between them. Moses keeps questioning, and God keeps answering him, so patiently. What’s going on? How and why does it happen this way? Finally, there’s a bigger picture, God’s greater plan, the huge and daunting task of bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt. How could such a tremendous event actually happen? And it all brings us back to a fundamental question: why Moses? And what could it mean to us in our own lives today?

Let’s start at the beginning. Look at 3:1. What first stands out here is what Moses is doing. He’s keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. That seems to be no big deal. But the context helps us grasp what’s going on. As we saw earlier, Moses was raised as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. When he grew up, to everyone’s eyes he was thoroughly Egyptian. What’s that got to do with what he’s doing now? There’s a clue in the book of Genesis. Genesis 46:34b says, “…for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.” We’re not exactly sure why this was. But for an Egyptian prince to become a shepherd of sheep out in the wilderness is definitely a study in extreme humiliation. Moses has been doing this for the past 40 years. For the first 40 years of his life he was in the Egyptian palace getting a princely education. For the next 40 years, no recognition, very little interaction with people, lots of solitude and silence. He’s been sharing some of the experience of his people living in slavery. We also note the location: the west side of the wilderness and Horeb, the mountain of God. Some scholars believe this is also called Mount Sinai, where Moses would later encounter God again and receive the Ten Commandments. In any case, it’s a very remote place, far removed from human civilization. But even there, it’s a place where God is dwelling, on this holy mountain.

Look at verse 2. An angel of the LORD has created this visual experience for Moses. There’s this flame of fire in the midst of a bush. Weird. And as Moses looks at it, though the bush is burning, it’s not consumed. Even weirder. Look at verse 3. For a man living in the drab, dull wilderness for so long, doing the same thing, herding around a flock of sheep day after day, month after month, year after year, this is indeed “a great sight.” When we’re living in monotony, it can be really hard just to get our attention. But now God has gotten Moses’.

Let’s read verse 4. Before going any further, let’s think about this initial encounter. First of all, it seems God could call Moses only after he’s gotten his full attention. Next, we see how personal it is. God calls him by his name. It means he knows him so well, so deeply. It’s also very urgent. God repeats his name, and, there’s an exclamation point. God’s call is not one of many interesting options to contemplate—it’s almost like there’s an emergency. The Bible calls him the God of peace. He’s the God of long-suffering patience. But there also comes a time when God is calling for immediate action.

Finally we notice Moses’ response: “Here I am.” Of course it’s just a natural reflex of responding to one’s name being called. But these words suggest something more. Moses is, in some sense, open to God’s call. It’s bizarre to him, and he doesn’t understand it, but he doesn’t run away from it, either. His words “Here I am” express a kind of humility. Moses no longer has any strong ambition of his own, no great plans or agenda. He doesn’t currently seem to be in any great inner conflict. There’s a simplicity in his response, “Here I am.” God seems to know this and perhaps has even been waiting for this.

But there’s more. Read verse 5. Coupled with the burning bush, these words make the experience almost surreal. “Holy ground.” “Take the sandals off your feet.” And most of all, “Do not come near.” Basically God’s calling involves an encounter with his holiness. Moses had been oblivious to it, but God’s holy presence is very real. We see this again and again throughout the Bible. Abraham had been living with his son Ishmael for 13 years when God appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.” Abraham fell on his face (Ge17:1,3). When Jacob left home as a young man and laid down to sleep, he had a dream and saw a ladder reaching to heaven, with God’s angels ascending and descending on it! When he woke up, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Ge28:11–17). Later in life, after he’d wrestled to grab all the blessings he could get and made enemies along the way, Jacob wrestled with an unknown man until daybreak. Then he realized it was God himself, yet his life had been delivered (Ge32:24–30). It was this encounter with the holy God that changed him deep within. The list of people in the Bible who encounter the holy God goes on and on. Though we’re so sinful, so earthbound, the holy God still chooses to encounter us and calls us to himself. He’s made it possible for ordinary people like us to be with him closely through Jesus, who atoned for all our sins and draws us into God’s presence (1Jn2:1–2; Eph2:13; Heb10:19).

The concept of “holy ground” is important. It’s not to idolize some specific place; it’s to help Moses forever remember this moment. “Holy ground” refers to when the Holy God calls us, only by his grace. The “ground” is made holy by his presence, his grace, his call. This “holy ground” experience becomes our spiritual foundation, something we always can come back to. Apostle Paul had such a “holy ground” experience. He’d been God’s enemy, persecuting Christians, but the Risen Christ in his one-sided grace called him to be his servant. He didn’t go back and make a shrine on that road to Damascus, but he often told the story of his “holy ground” experience (Ac9:1–9; 22:3–16; 26:12–18; 1Co15:8–10; Gal1:11–16; 1Ti1:12–17). A “holy ground” experience doesn’t have to have epic elements; it’s just a moment when God’s grace finally becomes real to us.

Look at verse 6. In the wilderness it seems Moses had forgotten about this God long ago. Most likely, he’d never been very close to him anyway. But now he’s having a real encounter with him. His fear to look at God is holy reverence and awe, and it’s how we too should respond to God’s holiness (Heb12:28–29).

This encounter isn’t just about Moses coming to personal faith. Read verses 7–10. God’s call to Moses involves his much bigger plan, and such an important task. It’s in this calling that Moses discovers what is life is really all about. It’s not about his princely upbringing. It’s not about his failure as a murderer. It’s not about his life in exile in the wilderness doing humiliating work. It’s about God calling him to use him for his own salvation plan.

The Bible tells us over and over again that every Christian is called by God (Ro1:6–7; 8:28,30; 9:24; 1Co1:2,9,24; Eph1:18; 4:1,4; 2Th2:13–14; 2Ti1:9; Heb3:1; 2Pe1:3; Rev17:14). God calls us because he loves us so much (Jude 1:1). And it always involves a call to holy living (1Th4:7; 1Pe1:15). It’s a call to come out of living in darkness, to live in God’s marvelous light (1Pe2:9). We may not be called to do something on a grand scale, but we’re all called to some specific work for God and his kingdom (e.g. Ac13:2; 16:10). Sometimes we can find our calling in the specific conditions of our lives (1Co7:20–22,24). We’re also called to a specific body of believers (Col3:15). This goes against the popular trend of church shopping. Fundamentally, we’re all called to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, to follow his example of suffering in order to save sinners (1Pe2:21). To fulfill our calling we may not have to go anywhere or do anything extraordinary; it all starts right where we are, with praying for and serving the real people God brings into our lives.

Throughout the rest of this passage we see Moses’ responses to God’s call. Look at verse 11. He first asks, “Who am I?” He feels so inadequate. He’s really changed from the entitled attitude he had when he first tried to help his people in Egypt, thinking, “Who *but* me?” Look at verse 13. Moses also feels unsure in his own personal knowledge of God. This may be one of the most remarkable elements of his response. To fulfill his calling, he’s not just asking for information about the correct name to use for God; he means he wants to know God better, deeper. Look at 4:1. Moses anticipates that his people will be skeptical about his experience. He’s been tainted by their original rejection of him, which led him to flee Egypt. And indeed, the people are fickle in their acceptance of Moses as their leader. When he does great miracles, they like him. When he leads them into any difficulty, they’re so quick to reject his leadership. Look at 4:10. Moses also mentions his being slow of speech and tongue. Maybe he means he’s lost his Egyptian language skills after living for the past 40 years in Midian. Maybe he’s even lost basic speaking skills because he’s really had no one to talk to, living as a shepherd of sheep. His speech problem isn’t just an anomaly. It speaks to the inadequacies we all feel when God calls us to a certain task. God doesn’t call us because of our abilities or resumé; he calls us despite all our weaknesses. He calls us to do something by depending not on ourselves but only on him. Look at 4:13. Here Moses is being stubborn; he just doesn’t want to do it. This is when God actually becomes angry with him.

And yet God is graciously encouraging him, from the beginning of this encounter to the end. Look at 3:12. When Moses says “Who am I?” God says, “I will be with you.” God gives him a future sign that someday he will serve God on this mountain. To get to that sign, Moses is going to have to just step out in faith. Perhaps God’s most gracious encouragement is in 3:14. Let’s read it. This name, “I AM,” in Hebrew is closely related to the letters YHWH, or Yahweh, which is translated in all capital letters in English as “the LORD.” This name, “I AM,” speaks to the eternal, unchanging nature of God. But it’s also a very personal name for God. It’s the word used for God in Genesis 2, when God plants the Garden of Eden to make human beings happy. It suggests that we experience who this God is as we experience his personal love in our lives, in so many specific ways. God, “the LORD,” the “I AM,” loves us; he so much wants us to be happy, in every way. He wants to bless us in Christ with every spiritual blessing (Eph1:3). “The LORD,” the “I AM” is not a philosophical concept of God; it’s a reality. He’s inviting us all to know him as “the LORD,” the “I AM,” through Jesus his Son. In John’s Gospel Jesus uses seven “I am” statements to tell us that he’s this God Incarnate. He’s inviting us all into fellowship with the eternal, Triune God: God the Father, Jesus his Son, and God the Spirit (1Jn1:1–3; 2Co13:14). Knowing this God becomes our greatest delight, our greatest comfort, and the only way to find out what life is really all about.

Look at 3:15. God also makes it clear that this name is not anything new; he’s the same God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He’s the God of history. In the New Testament Jesus also refers to these patriarchs of faith whom we will see someday in God’s kingdom (e.g. Lk13:28). To know God means to know him through his dealings with these very real people in history.

Look at 3:16–18. We notice here that “the elders” are repeated twice. Not only will God be with Moses, but God assures him that the elders of Israel will listen to his voice and also help him in his task. Look at 3:19–20. God tells him of the mighty hand he himself will use to enable Moses to complete his task. Look at 3:21–22. God also promises how he will enable the Israelites to plunder the Egyptians when they leave. Look at 4:2–5. God gives Moses a sign to perform with his staff. In Egyptian culture a snake represented royal authority. God would give Moses command over such a snake in the transformation of his staff and his grabbing the snake by its tail. Look at 4:6–8. Through this dramatic affliction and cure of Moses’ leprous hand God is showing that he’s able to heal even the incurable. Look at 4:9. Turning the Nile water to blood would point to one of the plagues on Egypt; God is showing that he’s sovereign over life and death and salvation. Look at 4:11–12. When Moses talks about his poor speech, God says, “I made your mouth. I will be with your mouth.” Finally, look at 4:14–16. When Moses says, “Send someone else,” God says, “I’ll send your brother Aaron with you. I’ll be with his mouth. You’ll give him my words, and he will speak them for you.” In the end, God says, “And take in your hands this staff.” God is helping Moses, who feels so weak, so inadequate, to depend on him through holding onto this staff. This shepherd’s staff becomes the symbol of his leadership.

There’s so much to learn here. But let’s read 3:4 again. God who called Moses is calling each of us personally. He wants us to be open to his call. He’s patient with us to encourage us to depend on him. May God give us faith to hear and accept his calling. May God help us know him in his holiness and in his amazing grace. May he help us see what he’s calling us to do with our lives.