

## The Fiery Presence That Sustains God's Servants

Where do we find the strength to do the harder things in life? Some people never seem to find the strength they need. Instead of finding God's strength for greater things they confine their life to comfortable things. They keep occupied with easily managed tasks that fill their hours without stretching them. Others try to be strong for life's inevitable challenges but too often do so out of pride. They don't want to admit weakness or suffer any defeats, so they clench their teeth, and just fight as hard as they can. But that kind of strength exacts a price. Too often it cost the people around you, and in the end, it isn't enough. So, where can you find the strength say, "Yes" to life and to God and do so with resilience instead of arrogance? This is a question that people have struggled with for thousands of years. It is one of the themes of the Bible. Here in **Exodus 3**, in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush there is an answer.

In the Bible, **Exodus** is both a book and an event. It is the book that tells the story of how God led his people from from bondage to freedom and used a very imperfect servant named Moses to do it. In the beginning of **chapter 3**, Moses is called to this task. It is in that calling that we find this lesson: ***Whatever God calls you to do, take heart and say, "Yes!". Because God does his redemptive work in this world through imperfect people empowered by his holy presence.***

*The story of Moses and the burning bush develops this truth in three movements that build on each other. In the first six verses, you have Moses' encounter with the burning bush where he is confronted with the holiness of God. The lesson here is ...*

### **I. WHATEVER GOD CALLS YOU TO DO YOU CAN TAKE HEART AND SAY, "YES," BECAUSE GOD IS SO WONDERFULLY HOLY.**

Look at **verses 2-5**, At the heart of this story is the imagery of the burning bush that is not consumed. Moses turns aside to see this thing. The Lord speaks to him within the fire and tells him not to get too close, to take off his sandals. He is standing on holy ground. Moses hides his face in fear. It is a unique story but a familiar theme. Someone is going about their daily life when suddenly the veil between the physical and the spiritual is pulled back, and the spiritual reality is

encountered. Without exception whenever human beings face the reality of God, his holiness seems to stun them and to humble them.

*What does it mean to say that God is holy?*

**A. God's holiness means he is in every good way far above and beyond us.**

The word "holy" means set apart. In the Bible, when used of God, it means he is in every *good* way above and beyond us. In **Isaiah 55:8-9** God tells us this: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* In **Isaiah 40** God asks this question; *To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? Says the Holy One.* This question corrects us when we think of God as too much like us in our imperfect humanity. There are no limits to God's love, truth, beauty, majesty, goodness, or righteousness.

The burning bush is a powerful representation of God's holy majesty. Fire is essential and elemental. We need its warmth and light. Its beauty fascinates us. And yet it can destroy us. If you put your hand in water, the water is displaced and gives way. If you put your hand in a fire, your hand becomes fuel. We love fire, but you don't want to play with fire. God's holiness is like that; beautiful but not tame, majestic and awe-inspiring – not to be played with. Years ago there was a book written titled: *Your God Is Too Small*. That is a good title. Most modern people think a lot about themselves and a lot *of* themselves but have pretty flabby, weak, and limited views of God. The paradox of spiritual life is we do not find sustaining strength in life by having big thoughts about ourselves but by having big thoughts about God.

*God's holiness humbles us and yet strengthens. Part of what's wonderful about it is that...*

**B. God, who is holy, condescends to connect with us in our messy humanness.**

**Verse 2** says *the angel of the LORD* appeared to Moses. The appearance of the angel of the LORD is a powerful phenomenon in the Bible. When the angel of the LORD appears to people, they say they have seen the LORD. When the angel of the Lord speaks the Bible simply says, "and the LORD said." That happens in **verse 4** where it says the *LORD saw* and the *LORD called to Moses*. The angel of the LORD is not just one of many created angels who serve God. The

angel of the LORD is the LORD. The angel of the LORD is the infinite, holy, invisible God presenting himself in a representative way in an angelic form so that finite human sensory perception can see, hear and relate to the infinite holy God and not be destroyed. Like so many things in the Hebrew Bible, the idea of the angel of the LORD will reach its ultimate expression when God doesn't just represent himself in an angelic form but so humbles himself that he becomes one of us in Jesus. So what the angel of the LORD is showing us in the early chapters of the Bible is the heart of God to reveal himself to finite and fallen human beings to relate to us to connect with us.

In **verse 4** the LORD says, *Moses, Moses*. This repetition of his name is a Hebrew Speech pattern called "the repetition of endearment." Old Testament Scholar Douglas Stuart says it is *a way of expressing endearment, that is affection and friendship. Thus Moses would have understood immediately that he was being addressed by someone who loved him and was concerned about him.*"<sup>1</sup>

Try to imagine you are Moses. You had a crazy dramatic childhood story. You were saved from a genocidal maniac in a little basket-boat. But then it was like you won the lottery. Pharaoh's daughter finds baby Moses. I guess that would sort of like if a desperate mother abandoned her baby in a taxi in the hope it would be cared for and it ends up on the steps of the Whitehouse and Ivanka takes a fancy to it. Looks like a happy ending. Except it isn't the ending. When Moses hits forty, he identifies with his own people and kills an Egyptian and ends up a criminal running for his life. He went east of Egypt into the desert wilderness to the land of Midian. He ends up an outcast in a foreign land. But he meets a family, marries one of the daughters, named Zipporah. And he becomes a shepherd watching over the flocks of his father-in-law. When you get to this story, **Exodus 3:1** the Hebrew could actually be translated "*Now Moses was still keeping the flocks of his father-in-law.*" According to the speech of Stephan in **Acts 7**, another forty years have passed. So Moses is 80 years old now! He is an aging outcast whose youthful dreams and prospects are long past. He's just trying to play the hand he's been dealt, tending sheep that aren't even his own. No one is inviting him to do a TED talk.

One facet of the majestic holiness of God is that as holy as he is, he reaches out to imperfect people with unimpressive resumes. He is holy but part of his holiness is that as holy as he is he condescends to reach out to people like us. To be attuned to the spiritual reality of his

holy presence is strengthening. *Whatever God calls you to do you can take heart and say, "yes," because God is so wonderfully holy.*

*The second part of the story builds on that – it tells us that this God who is so wonderfully holy is also graciously redemptive.*

## **II. WHATEVER GOD CALLS YOU TO DO, YOU CAN TAKE HEART AND SAY, “YES” BECAUSE GOD’S PURPOSE IS REDEMPTION.**

In **verses 7-8** God reveals his redemptive purpose. *Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.* To deliver from suffering and bondage is redemption.

### **A. God cares for and redeems people who are suffering.**

In **verse 7** God says, he has *seen the affliction* of his people. He *hears their cries*. He *knows* their sufferings. It is out of compassion for them that **verse 8b** says, *he has come down to deliver them*. These are flawed and sinful people as the following story will show, but God sees their affliction and not just their transgressions. He hears their cries and not just their lies. The wonderfully holy God of the burning bush has an inextinguishable love for unholy people. He is a redeemer.

*And...*

### **B. He uses people like us to do his redemptive work.**

In **verse 7** God said *I have come down to deliver them*. But then in **verse 10** he says, *Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.*” This is one of the core principles of the Bible, namely, that when God wants to do good redemptive work in the world, he uses people.

A pastor I know did a sermon on the burning bush, and he told the story of a woman who had a boss who was so unusual to her that he was sort of like a burning bush. He caused her to turn aside from her otherwise completely uninterested life to take a closer look at the Christian faith. She wasn't religious and wasn't interested in religion. She worked for a TV network and, I don't know what she did, but at some point, she messed up at the workplace in a way that should have

cost her job. But her boss took the heat – the blame for what she had done. He had to longevity and reputation that he could take the blame and keep his job, but it was still a big deal. She couldn't understand why he did it. She had had bosses who took credit for what she had done but never the other way around. She went to him and thanked him and asked why he did it. He tried to play it down, but she knew it was a big deal, so she kept pushing for an answer. Eventually, he said; "All right, I'm a Christian." She said, "What does that have to do with it?" He explained to her that at the center of the Christian faith is the faith that God is a redeemer. As part of his redeeming grace, he comes and actually takes the blame for us. He said it was because of that he could take the blame for her. This was completely unexpected by her. She thought religion made you more likely to be a blamer of others. This idea of God redeeming us and then calling us to share something of his redemption is what drew her in and led to faith.

God is not only a redeeming God, but he uses us in his redemptive work. Maybe you are not called to lead a nation to a new land, but perhaps you are invited in some small way to be an agent of redemption in your family, or in some other circle of relationships. Maybe you are called to do something redemptive that expresses the heart of God and draws people to him. His purpose, in which he includes all of us in various ways, is redemption. So whatever he calls you to do, take heart and say "yes!" to God.

*Now there is a third part to the story and its message. Once God's holiness is established, and his redemptive purpose is revealed his empowering presence is promised. Here's the third lesson.*

### **III. WHATEVER GOD CALLS YOU TO DO, TAKE HEART AND SAY, "YES," BECAUSE GOD'S PRESENCE WILL BE WITH YOU.**

Look at **verses 11-15**. *But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"<sup>12</sup> He [God] 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."*

#### **A. When God calls you to do his work in this world, he promises to be with you in that work that you do for him.**

Moses says, *who am I?* God says, it doesn't matter who you are because I will be with you.

And look at the sign God gives. God says when you have done what I am telling you to do the sign that I have sent you will be that you have done what I called you to do! In other words, you can know that God is with you if you will believe what God has told you. But the outward confirmation that God is with you will sometimes only be seen when you have done what God has told you.

I remember thirty years ago riding the elevator at Halifax hospital to meet the family of a young man named Bill who had just died. It was suicide. They tried to save him, but it was too late. I was frustrated because I didn't know what to say to his loved ones. I didn't want to face them, field their hard questions and feel my inadequacy. Alone in the elevator, I felt as if Christ spoke to me. He said, "*I am with you, and this is not about you.*" It was as if my heart relaxed and a weight lifted. Somehow, I was able to be of some help to that family. As I rode the elevator down, I gave thanks because he had been with me.

*I think whenever you tell the Lord that you are inadequate; he just says, "I know that, but I am with you...."*

**B. God's presence is sufficient for us in all he calls us to do.**

In **verses 13-14**, Moses said, *if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "**I AM WHO I AM.**" And he said, "*Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'*" The common pronunciation for the word translated "**I AM**" is *Yahweh*.

**1<sup>st</sup> It means God is eternal and unchanging.** He doesn't say I was who I was or I will be who I will be but "I am." He has no past or future like us. He is who he is and always has been and always will be.

**2<sup>nd</sup> It means God is self-sufficient.** Everything else owes its existence to him, but he owes his existence to nothing and no one. God doesn't have any needs. He is exhaustively self-sufficient. When he calls you to be involved in his redemptive work you do not have to become a stronger person you need to trust that you have a sufficient God who is with you in whatever work he calls you to do for him.

The burning bush that is not consumed is a perfect symbol for his presence. He gives and in giving loses nothing, He works and never grows weary. He doesn't need to rest or recharge. If "**I Am**" is with you He is more than enough for whatever you face.

God wants you to be redeemed and to become part of his redeeming work in the world empowered by his holy presence with you.

## Conclusion

In the imagery of the Bible we are all in a some sort of bondage in a spiritual Egypt. Trapped by our hurts and hang ups we sin and are sinned against. God sees our affliction, hears our cries and knows our suffering. Moses was God's man to redeem the people of Israel. Because of that, in the story of the Bible, he becomes a picture of the ultimate redeemer – Jesus. In Jesus the “*I Am*” becomes *Immanuel*, God with us. In the mysterious transaction that takes place on the cross he suffers the judgment we deserve and then conquers death in his resurrection so he can set us free and bring us home.

Everyone who trusts in Jesus gets out of all that Egypt represents, out of death and out of bondage. That's grace, which means you don't ever earn that or deserve it. You don't have to and you can't. God, who called Moses by name, calls you by his Spirit. It isn't audible but it is real and you say, “yes”.

For us on this side of the story of Jesus that means you accept Jesus, as the redeemer who comes in the name of God to set you free. Aren't you ready to come to him and trust in him? Are you tired of how things are for you right now? The moment turn to Christ as Lord and trust him as your Savior, the one whose name is *I AM* comes to live in you. The life-giving fire he ignites in you does not consume you. It become a light and a warmth that endures as long as he is the *I AM* - which is forever.

*So where do we find strength to do the hard things in life? You find strength in the wonderful holiness, the redemptive purpose, and the promised presence of God. **Whatever God calls you to do, you can take heart and say, “Yes!”**. Because God does his redemptive work in this world through imperfect people empowered by his holy presence.*

**Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart, Exodus