

EXODUS

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Exodus 3:1-6

What God is Like

What comes to our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

There is nothing more important than God, and nothing more important for us, the people who are made to reflect Him, than to know Him. Because it is only when we know Him that everything else comes into its proper focus, everything else takes its proper place in our lives.

To know yourself, your purpose, to be able to assess yourself accurately, you must know God.

John Calvin: *“Nobody ever attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.”*¹

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

So the beginning of all true wisdom is a fear of God. And true insight is knowing the Holy One.

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So what’s about to happen to Moses in our story couldn’t be more profound for him - because He will be meeting God, and the implications for us couldn’t be more profound. Because we need to know God: we need to know Who God is, what God is like, and we need to know Him and walk with Him. But for that to happen, he has to reveal Himself to us, because we could never find Him on our own.

¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.2-3

So to catch you up a little on Moses - he is a Jewish man who grew up in Pharaoh's house. But he gave up the fortune there to be the leader of the Jews who were enslaved in Egypt. But they rejected him.

So at age 40, he became an exile in nearby Midian. There, he married a woman named Zipporah, had a couple of kids, and became a shepherd, working for his father-in-law Reuel, who is also called Jethro. And that's what he did for 40 years.

So now he is 80. He is a different man, a broken man, but one who seemed to have become content with the life God had given Him.

Exodus 3:1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

So Moses is out keeping his father-in-law's sheep. This means that Moses had not acquired land or flocks for himself, he wasn't wealthy. It also means he was fully associated with the Jewish people, not the Egyptians, because shepherds were considered to be disgusting people by the Egyptians.² Moses had gotten rid of those Egyptian values and become a shepherd himself, becoming the thing the higher ups in Egypt despised.

So he has fully given up his wealth, his status, and the bad values of the Egyptians. And now, at age 80, he is only a humble Jewish working man.

So he leads the flocks out to Mt. Horeb, which is the same as Mt. Sinai, which is mentioned a lot in the Bible and most famously is the place where Moses would later get the 10 commandments from God.

But Moses has no idea that he is going to be Moses. He must think he's going to live and die as a shepherd. He's been bringing the sheep out on these hills for 40 years, it has been a relatively boring four decades. But today it is different:

2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

The Angel of the Lord appears to Moses. So who is the Angel of the Lord?

² Genesis 46:34

Angels, typically, are spirit beings created by God to serve.

Hebrews 1:14 “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”

The word angel comes from the greek word “angelos” which just means messenger. So they are spirit beings that serve Christians, and that are usually invisible but show up sometimes.

But this one is different. He isn't “an” angel of the Lord - just a messenger sent by God, but “the” angel. And this angel specifically is mentioned 67 times in the Old Testament, so He's an important character.

He showed up first in Genesis 16 to Hagar:

Genesis 16:7 The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ...

Genesis 16:13 So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,”for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.”

So notice that in verse 7 this is the “angel of the Lord.” In verse 13 it is “the Lord.” She calls Him God.

When this angel appears to Abraham in Genesis 22, he promises Abraham descendants. The Angel of the Lord forgives sin.

Angels in the bible typically refuse to be worshipped, because only God should be worshipped, but The Angel of the Lord is worshipped by Moses and Joshua. And in

Exodus 3:6 the angel says **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”**

So The Angel of the Lord is the Lord. He is God who comes as an angel or messenger. He shows up in a physical form so He can be seen and interacted with by people. He is God in a physical form - which is who Jesus is. So this seems to be Jesus showing up before his birth to meet with Moses.

Moses was certainly not expecting this, and he wasn't looking for this. Moses hadn't achieved something or worked hard enough or gone into a deep trance so he could there find God, this wasn't because Moses was in a deep spiritual state. God showed up. God is intervening here, Moses didn't find God. God came to Moses.

And one of the important things to realize about knowing God is knowing that we simply can't know Him on our own. We can't know God without God's help.

Because no matter where we look in the universe, we won't find God.

We will find evidence of God. Tim Keller described the world almost like a crime scene where God's fingerprints are all over the place. But we can't train a telescope on the right part of the sky and look right at Him like we can a planet - He doesn't exist as a part of our universe.

In Keller's book *The Reason for God*, he compares people who are looking for God on earth to Romeo looking for Shakespeare – Romeo can't just go upstairs to see Shakespeare. Shakespeare is the author and Romeo is the character, they don't even live in the same dimension.

Romeo can go all around his world and see the poetic beauty, see the drama of the way things are playing out, think that it's strange that everybody speaks in iambic pentameter, and he can suspect that there is an author behind the scenes, but no matter where he goes in his world he'll never see Shakespeare.

The only way that Romeo will EVER run into Shakespeare is if Shakespeare writes himself into the play. Shakespeare would have to step in to Romeo's world if Romeo would ever meet him.

And no matter where we look in the universe, we won't find God, unless God writes Himself into the play. And in Christianity we believe that God has written Himself into our history - all the places He shows up in the Bible, when He comes as Jesus, when He is known by any human, it is because God has revealed Himself.

God must show up for us to know Him, because we could never find Him on our own. We are totally dependent on Him if we'll ever know Him.

But He's good and gracious. And, even though we could never find God on our own by looking, God has made this promise:

Deuteronomy 4:29 "But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul."

God decides when He'll be found, and often He intervenes so He is found by those who are not looking for Him at all. But He has decided to always make Himself known to anyone who would seek Him with all their heart.

So for those of you who are looking for God - don't stop. There has never been anyone who has searched for God with all his heart and not found Him. There is nobody who is truly willing to find and worship God, *whatever that will mean*, who ever fails to find Him. Because God reveals Himself to true seekers. (In fact, you only are a true seeker because He's working on your heart and drawing you in to begin with.)

Keep praying. Even now ask God to show you Who He is. God doesn't have to do this, but God has never failed to reveal Himself to the heart of anybody who has truly sought Him. "Seek and ye shall find," Jesus said.

God reveals Himself to people. Which is a tremendous act of grace and kindness. He didn't just activate the universe and then let it unwind itself.

Especially after people had sinned, God easily could have said, "These people have become toxic, they have nothing to offer me, they could only do damage to me, so I'm cutting them out of my life."

But even though we rebelled, God stayed involved and caring, and didn't run away but actually drew closer in Christ and allowed us to do that damage to Him in Jesus so that our life could be restored.

It's incredible that God stays involved.

Psalm 8:3-4 "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"

So by showing up here in Exodus, uninvited, unsought, God reveals Himself as a God who reveals Himself. He's involved. He hears, He knows, He sees, He cares, and He has not left us in darkness, but reveals Himself to us.

And it's obviously incredibly significant that the Lord shows up as a burning bush.

Which is a little strange. Why not a bigger effect?

When God does miracles, when God provides signs and wonders, He isn't trying first and foremost to wow us- He isn't giving the biggest possible demonstration of His power. He is surprising us with the wonder, but the goal is not just to surprise us and wow us, but to teach us about Himself. When Jesus fed the 5000, for example, He quickly followed it up by teaching "I am the bread of life." The display of power had a point beyond just being a pretty cool trick.

So what does it teach us that God showed up as a bush that is burning and not being consumed.

For one, it shows He is self-existent. God is a God who doesn't run on any fuel - He's burning without consuming anything.

He is the source, He is His own fuel, He is not dependent on anyone or anything else. And He is the only one and only thing like that. We are dependent on Him and His gifts to exist at all - He keeps our heart beating, He provides food for us, He provides the heat and light from the sun. If the sun goes out, we go out too - as arrogant as we might become, and as prone as we are to boasting in our own achievements, we are totally dependent creatures. When we burn, we consume. God is dependent on nobody, burning eternally with no fuel at all.

He is the only truly independent being. Everyone and everything else is totally dependent.

In a few verses He will reveal to Moses that His name is "I am", or Yahweh. That name means that He is the self-existent, self-sustaining one, without beginning or end or limit.

He didn't create us because He needed us (he was bored, or needed friends.) He needs no fuel. He doesn't *need* at all. Which means that all of His dealings with us are out of the overflow of His love and grace. Paul said it this way in Acts 17:

Acts 17:24-28 "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,³ 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

And so often we think we are doing God a favor with our service, with our efforts, with our obedience. Like he needed us on the team and we gave Him the privilege of having us on it. But He has never needed us or anything else.

Beware of trying to do good and make sacrifices to obligate God to do something for you. He desires our service because our deepest joy comes in walking with Him and serving Him and others. But He doesn't need it.

And think of how this affects our service. Often we act like our obedience puts God in our debt. I made this sacrifice, I did this thing that God needed. And now He owes me.

So everything we ask for from God is not because He owes us one, it's because we know He is a gracious generous Father. He's the giver of all good things, He loves to richly provide us with all good things to enjoy.

Psalm 50 says it this way:

Psalm 50:9-12 "I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds.10 For every beast of the forest is mine,the cattle on a thousand hills.11 I know all the birds of the hills,and all that moves in the field is mine.12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

He desires our financial giving because it orients our heart around what matters most. It's not that He's broke and we have what He needs.

He's the source. Anything we give to Him is just giving back what is rightly His. Anything we do for Him was with His strength. It's like when you give your children money to buy you Christmas gifts. Even the good thing they do for you is with your resources.

He needs nothing from us. Which makes it all the more remarkable that He loves us, and interacts with us, and died for us.

So much of what we do for each other is because we need each other. You may be good to your boss because you need a paycheck. But if you inherited a fortune tomorrow, that goodness might go away. A lot of what we call love is actually just need.

God has no need. So all of His love is genuine. He didn't die for us because He needed to scratch some itch He had or feed some appetite. It was pure, unselfish love. We had nothing He needed, but still He loved us.

And He shows up like a fire, which He does a lot in Exodus. A pillar of fire leads the Israelites in the wilderness, fire covers this mountain when God gives the commandments. Why a fire?

I think the answer is in what happens next:

3 And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” 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.” 5 Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Two things happen here that are almost contradictory.

One is that God doesn't just say "Moses," but "Moses, Moses," which is a Hebrew way of speaking called a "repetition of endearment."³ You would use somebody's name twice to represent closeness and intimacy and friendship. God calls to Samuel by saying "Samuel, Samuel." People who thought they were close to Jesus called Him "Lord, Lord."

So God calls to Moses "Moses Moses" like He will be dealing with him as a friend.

But then He says, "Do not come near."

And fire does that too, doesn't it?

Fire offers warmth and attraction. We have a fireplace at our house, and on a cold Sunday afternoon, I love to go home and light the fireplace and watch the Bills game. And the fireplace isn't necessary - we have a furnace. The fireplace isn't efficient, we lose more heat than we gain through it, I think. When it comes to heating bills it's just a loss, (which may be why it pairs so nicely with a Bills game.)

But we are all attracted to the warmth and glow of a fire. We just love fires. So a fire represents warmth and attraction. The warmth of God's call to "Moses, Moses," is visible in the fire.

But at the same time, we know fires can be a destructive force. People in Mendocino County, California, this past year weren't saying "we just love fires," because fires were ripping through homes.

³ New American Commentary, 113

Fire can warm you or it can destroy you. It attracts you but gives you cause for caution.

It says, “come near”, and it says, “come no farther.” And God is calling Moses to come near, and commanding him to come no farther.

This is revealing two important attributes of God, attributes that can seem to be almost contradictory.

One is that God is love.

1 John 4:8 “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Love is a central attribute of God - it's what God is like.

God loves us and affectionately calls us by name.

Sometimes we think as Christians, “God loves me, because he has to. Jesus died for me, I have clung to Jesus by faith, so now God is legally obligated to love me because Jesus made Him do it. Like God signed up for a bad deal and now He's just doing it because He said He would. Jesus died for us and therefore God loves us.

But John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

God loved so He sent His son. He didn't love us once we were fixed up. He didn't love only the final version of us in heaven when we're finally lovable. He didn't love us only because Jesus died. He loved us while we were still sinners, still rebels, still broken, still a wreck.

We are not here today, I hope, trying to get God to love us. We don't have to cross some threshold of righteousness on our own to earn God's approval. God is love. He loves us as we are, with no changes, not improvements - He is love, he is warmth, and He says your name, twice, and draws you in.

We all have the sense there should be a love like that. A love that never fades, someone who loves us that never dies or changes, a steady, warm, powerful, enduring, unconditional love. We are all hungry for love like that, but it doesn't exist in the world.

Even when you marry that amazing person and the love is real and deep and committed, that person dies or you dies. Nobody can love you in a way that satisfies that longing for eternal and infinite love.

Which points us toward the Fire:

In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote this:

"Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

We have an appetite for a love that doesn't exist in this world. But that appetite could only be there if some satisfaction for it existed. And it does exist in Him. He calls our name twice and attracts us.

But then, shockingly to us as Americans:

5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

God says do not come near.

Don't get too near to the fire. Don't get too near to God. This is holy ground.

So what does it mean that God is holy?

Often we think holiness is just moral cleanness or purity. Which is one definition of holiness. But the primary meaning of the word holy is separate. Sproul writes, "When the Bible calls God holy, it means primarily that God is transcendentally separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us."⁴

And it is accompanied by a sense of real fear in those that have seen God.

⁴ Sproul, R. C.. The Holiness of God (p. 38). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Judges 13:22 ““We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”

So Moses here is hiding his face from God, who is Holy. Because getting too close to a holy God, like getting too close to a hot fire, could be deadly.

Because we are not Holy. God has eyes that are all seeing, a mind that is all knowing, and to have Him look at you would be absolutely terrifying. Because He knows it all. So when we sense that there's a fear and trembling and we rightly hide from Him.

The fire draws us in. But it also keeps us out.

The Bible began with the story of God coming to walk with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day. There was nothing but closeness and intimacy there. But then they sinned.

Genesis 3:24 “He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

So the fire kept them out. Their sin meant they couldn't get back to that place of total closeness and intimacy with God. They couldn't get back to that experience of constantly sensing the deepest of all possible loves. Because their sin meant the holiness of God was violated. And the fire kept them away.

Because part of holiness is also perfect justice. And if God is Holy, then his justice is perfect. Which means all sin must be punished completely.

So the fire in the Bible is the instrument of God's wrath. The end for those who have not trusted in Christ in the book of Revelation is the lake that burns with fire.

And this God of wrath that we tremble before and hide from is almost a foreign concept. It can feel very medieval and primitive. Because today we embrace Him as a God of love.

But in the burning bush we see both. “Moses, Moses,” and “stop - come no farther, this ground is holy.”

So He is a God who calls to us in love, but can't welcome us because of holiness.

Proverbs 17:15 He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.

God is not a hateful thing to himself - he is just, and he punishes sins as they deserve to be punished. They are sins against an infinitely holy God and the only fair punishment is an infinite one in hell.

The fire calls to us, and the fire burns us.

This is the problem.

The love that we all long for is out there, it is calling to us. But we can't get in.

We can't get to God.

But the answer is that God wrote Himself into the story again.

Jesus came.

In love, He came to us, He revealed Himself to us, and then went to the cross and died to satisfy God's holy requirements.

On the cross he took the punishment we deserve, all of the "do not come near" of God was poured out on Jesus, so for those who trust Him and receive that gift, we can come near.

It's not that we got the idea that God is a God of wrath wrong. It's that the wrath was satisfied.

It is popular today to say that we need to get rid of the idea of a God of wrath and punishment because we want to have a God of love.

Popular authors are rethinking and rebranding Christianity to the point where the holiness of God, the justice of God, punishment of sin, the offendedness of God, are rethought right out of the system. And the reason is that they are nice people and would rather have a God of love. Which is well-intentioned.

But God's holiness and justice and wrath actually enhance our view of God's love.

What Jesus went through for us is insignificant if there is no sin and justice and punishment from God. Jesus would have just died just like many other martyrs have died. But knowing He was swallowing the whole punishment that we deserve shows us the extent of His love.

The God of the Bible does have ferocious wrath stored up to punish sinners for their sin, but the God of the Bible loved those sinners so much that he became sin and endured that wrath for them.

It is because of wrath that we see the love of God. He loved us with a costly love. It cost him the physical pain of his crucifixion to redeem us, but also the immense spiritual pain of rejection by his Father. And it was only because He did all that that He could say "Come near" without holding us back.

And this is love. No other religion tells you that God loves you this much. Buddhism has a disconnected and impersonal god. Islam tells you god loves you, but never that he became a man and suffered for you like this.

No other religion says god experienced the equivalent of hell on your behalf. Nobody loves like Jesus.

Isaiah 43 1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Before the cross, "God is with you when you suffer." And it was a nice thought, that his presence was there.

But then Jesus came. And he was literally God with us. He walked through the waters that we walk through. He endured it all for us.

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

Jesus came and loved at great expense to Himself - sacrificially, giving his life,

accepting a worse lot for himself so we could have a better lot. Taking the pain and loneliness on Himself so we could have love and acceptance with God.

And the place where the almost contradictory love of God and holy justice of God meet is on the cross.

Lord's Supper.

Exodus 3:1-6
What God is Like

I. The Angel of the Lord

II. The Fire of the Lord

III. The Holiness of the Lord

For Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) What is the fear of the Lord? What isn't it?
- 2) What does it mean that God is Holy?
- 3) Why would God reveal Himself in fire?
- 4) How does the cross change our view of God's holiness? His nearness?

Proverbs 9:10
Exodus 3:1
Exodus 3:2
Hebrews 1:14
Genesis 16:7
Genesis 16:13
Exodus 3:6
Deuteronomy 4:29
Psalm 8:3-4
Acts 17:24-28
Psalm 50:9-12
Exodus 3:3-5
1 John 4:8

John 3:16
Exodus 3:5-6
Judges 13:22
Genesis 3:24
Proverbs 17:15
Isaiah 43:1-3
John 15:13