

## Exodus 4:10–31 When Sovereignty Subdues

This past week one of my grown children celebrated his 24th birthday. Twenty-three or so years ago, we celebrated many other things which most celebrate in the life of a child inside of a year old. We clapped when he took his first bite of solid food. We became obnoxious in our enthusiasm when he said his first word. And perhaps the most demonstrative celebratory act on the part of any set of parents, especially within the *first* child's experience, is when the infamous first step is taken. Some of the reason we make such a joyful stink over all these things is that the child is slowly progressing into our world. They gradually eat what we eat, speak in ways that are understandable to their context, and no longer scoot or go from one space to the next on all fours, but walk on two legs.

But these kinds of things need more than celebratory encouragements as little ones grow up. Along the way they might need motivations towards development, sometimes they need the prospects of rewards held out, but there are certainly times when they need outright firmness, commands given with consequences if not heeded. In our text today we discover that God is more than supplying what's needed to convince Moses to walk by faith and not by sight.

Moses keeps looking around and within as God has given him multiple reasons to look up. It's precisely what we've been witnessing in chapters 3 & 4 thus far. The beginnings of the glorious revelation of the God of Israel are being layered before Moses. In what ways? God has expressed His faithfulness to Moses by appealing to His long-term plan to provide for Israel, going back to his father Abraham and going forward to worshipping with all Israel on Sinai. To Moses God has expressed, through a fascinating bush alight, His uniqueness and otherness. The LORD has uncloaked His almighty abilities through a withered and healed hand, a shape-shifting staff, and the promise of more "signs and wonders" to come. On these bases, Moses is to take God by the hand and go forward in obedience. But he flinches.

### I. Resistance is met with sovereignty (clarification and commandment)

After God offers these tangible signs of His power to transform, one might expect Moses to hop on his donkey and get going westward. But Moses is not done pushing the divine envelope. Verse 10, ***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."***

This is the third objection by Moses in his response to God. The first two we might sympathize with. "How do I express who You are to the people of Israel?" and "What if they don't believe me?" It's hard to ignore how Moses is developing the pattern of pointing back to how he might fit comfortably within these future encounters. So Moses comes to the LORD with yet another appeal. He has an insecurity about his speaking abilities. We're not told the precise nature of how Moses understood his skill, or lack thereof, with words. And perhaps the broader thought here from Moses is, "Lord, don't you see?! So much could go wrong with me in the mix." The pattern continues as we examine verse 10. Moses turns up the wattage on the self-directed spotlight. ***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.***

His manner of address is not unusual in the Hebrew mind throughout the scriptures. It was a part of Near Eastern culture to utilize self-deprecation at being given a great assignment.<sup>1</sup> We hear the echo of Abraham in Genesis, “*Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I, who am but dust and ashes.*”<sup>2</sup> We read of David’s words to Saul’s servants, “*Does it seem to you a little thing to become the king’s son-in-law, since I am a poor man and have no reputation?*”<sup>3</sup> Much later, Jeremiah the prophet would express in the face of his calling to declare the word of the LORD, “*Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.*”<sup>4</sup> This “exaggerated humility,” as one scholar tagged it, was even evident from the pen of the apostle Paul.<sup>5</sup> And here we find Moses doing the same, appealing to his lack of eloquence, literally saying that he is heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue.<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, it’s the same word used of Pharaoh’s heart being hardened, “heavy of heart.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, the irony here is that Moses is being very careful and calculated with his words while declaring that the use of words is not his specialty. Moses might truly possess that feeling of unworthiness before such a God, but the great error is that Moses keeps inspecting the wrong set of abilities.<sup>8</sup> And this is holding him back from obeying.

And God replies to redirect Moses inward-turning posture, verse 11, ***Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”*** The gifts and abilities that Moses had or didn’t have were a moot point. It was the sovereign working of God, the Creator and LORD over all, who could put His words in the mouth of recoiling, deadpan lips. It is this LORD who has every right as supreme King and Judge of all the earth to *withhold* every conventional means by which we receive and process information in His world. Being close to Advent season, you might recall Zechariah in Luke 1, who was made mute for not believing God’s promise that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son.<sup>9</sup> The mouth, ear, and eye are God’s to use in any way that pleases Him and fulfills His purposes. This truth was declared by God to eclipse all else for Moses, and with finality strip Moses of further protest. The real problem was not the insufficiency of Moses, but the focus of Moses. Scrutinizing ourselves in God’s service, we’re going to always find insufficiency, that is, if we’re clear eyed enough. But we’re to be forewarned: inward fixation is usually fertile ground for an unbelieving heart.<sup>10</sup>

On this basis of God’s supremacy over human faculties, and simply because enough is enough, God issues the clear command. ***[12] Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.*** Yet, this resistance keeps growing inside the prophet. We learn of another prophet many years later in Israel’s history who resisted God’s command to go. The parallels between Moses and Jonah are strikingly similar, and they keep unfolding here.<sup>11</sup>

After hearing the command a final time, we read in verse 13, ***But [Moses] said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” [14] Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses...***

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:27

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 18:23

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 1:6

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 3:8, 1 Timothy 1:15

<sup>6</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *AOTC: Exodus*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Leonard, *The Preacher’s Hebrew Companion Series, Exodus 1:1-15:21*, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Paul would temper any who might suppose that oratory gifts function as a prerequisite for effective ministry in 1 Corinthians 2:1.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:20, “*And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.*”

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel According to Moses*, 65.

<sup>11</sup> See it charted out on last page. This is not authoritative in any way, but I found it fascinating.

The wording by Moses seems to lean towards him crossing a threshold with the LORD. He gives the suggestion to *send someone else...**Then the anger of the LORD was kindled...*** Moses humility spirals downward into an outright distrust. He was essentially saying, “I can’t do this regardless of who You are and what You’ve shown me about Yourself.” But God had richly provided Moses with every reason to say, “Lord, I can’t do this, but *because* of who you are, I will do and I must do what You say!” We all possess the *Moses Malady* at certain seasons of our lives. We wield humility towards God as if that is all that He loves and requires. And don’t mistake it—God loves the humble and contrite heart.<sup>12</sup> He should hear quite often from our lips our own sense of unworthiness, our own understanding of personal inabilities, and our gaping weaknesses. But genuine humility can morph into prideful resistance quick when we use it as an excuse to disregard what God has clearly commanded.

And we see here, again, God’s stance in the face of prideful resistance. Verse 14, ***Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses...*** I recall scouting deer with a friend in my high school days. Lake County, where I grew up, is loaded with deer and deer season there is a big deal. So, seeing deer was not unusual, but walking upon a group of 15-20 one day was the first and only time that happened in my life. Very vivid in my mind was that about 30 seconds into the standoff with me and my friend Chip, the large buck among them snorted so dramatically that it physically startled me. And of course, when I jumped, it startled the herd and away they sprinted, melting into the wood line. This nasal snort conveyed a change in their then current peaceful situation before our rude interruption. Some wildlife experts say they’re clearing the scent from their own nose to sniff the possible danger of what they are seeing. Some say they are alerting each other to the new, unwanted guests. Others say that the snort is a way securing a reaction from the perceived threat—and if that’s true, it worked. Here, the word *anger* is really the Hebrew word for *nose*, which is a symbol of and an instrument through which we perceive and express anger.<sup>13</sup> Think flaring nostrils, in anger nostrils take in deeper breaths because the heart is pumping so fast, and nostrils becoming flushed with the rest of the face as it reflects an angry countenance.<sup>14</sup> God’s anger *was kindled against Moses* because of this stubborn display of unbelief. The holy ground had become thin ice.

## II. Lack is met with provisions (mercy and mediation)

Moses built a house of resistance on pillars of excuses—they won’t listen to my voice, I need to know more about You to speak of You, my verbal articulations are lacking so I can’t possibly speak on Your behalf, LORD, and as a final plea, Moses, who ran dry of personal reflections and points of dispute, says, ***Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.*** But notice the wording. It’s almost as if we can take some comfort in the idea of God’s anger being merely *kindled* and not yet a full-blown blaze. In fact, we astoundingly find another concession being made by God in His unparalleled kindness. Verse 14 again, ***Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.*** Just like our patient Father, the Father whom Jesus taught us to pray to and trust in for all things we need to live and grow spiritually, Moses experienced such patient mercy here. Not only is God going to take some of the leadership weight off Moses plate and place some of it on Aaron’s, but Moses had to find Aaron’s soon-to-be arrival a deep encouragement. Motyer

---

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 51:17, Isaiah, 57:15, and Isaiah 66:2 all expresses this.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

expresses about these moments, “Even when what we ask for is a display of our distrust, God still bothers with us and provides for our needs.”<sup>15</sup>

At this juncture, it seems as if Moses wall of resistance has been lowered. He goes to his father-in-law to respectfully request permission to leave Midian, with the welfare of his fellow Hebrews in mind according to verse 18. God relieves Moses in verse 19 of the angst he felt at returning to a place where the governmental powers sought his life—their interest in his life had died because those who carried that interest had died. And up to verse 23, the LORD gives Moses some very specific and somber points to communicate to Pharaoh, which included telling one of the most powerful men in the world that the God unseen by human eyes would take the life of the apple of his own eye if Pharaoh refused to obey. ***If you refuse to let [Israel] go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.***

And then in verse 24, we encounter another precarious situation for Moses. This small section from verse 24-26, as you can imagine, has stirred up much debate through the ages. Again, it reads, ***[24] At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.*** And perhaps all of us, on some level, could offer a collective “Oh no! What has Moses done this time?!” It’s actually more of what Moses *failed* to do. He failed to do his due diligence regarding God’s covenant stipulations. He failed to circumcise his son Gershom according to God’s word given to Abraham. In fact, the language to Abraham was clear, “*Any uncircumcised male...shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*”<sup>16</sup>

It’s reasonable for us to think that Moses somehow knew this requirement and yet the hardness of Moses own heart here was yet another manifestation of unbelief. It was his responsibility to see this obedient procedure through, and God presumably gave him plenty of opportunities to perform this act. ***On the way*** to Egypt God, having been remarkably patient, finally calls him to account. This circumcision served as identification with the living and true God—a physical mark which would later reflect a spiritual reality for those in Christ. The fallout, without making this situation right, would be no less than Moses’ death.

And once again, in Exodus, the bright star of faithfulness to the LORD under such dark circumstances was a godly woman. Verse 25, ***Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” [26] So he let him alone.*** Whew! Mercy prevailed and divine wrath assuaged. We’ll keep saying it because we can’t stop finding this reality in the Bible...God uses means to keep his promises, promises that are eternal. He uses means to fulfill His purposes in real time. For example, Isaiah 53 promises forward that it would be “*the will of the LORD to crush [this future suffering Servant] ...to put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt...*” Did the Jewish authorities have a hand in the death of Christ? Did the Roman government have a place in the crucifixion of the Son of God? Did my very own sin have a hand in the death of the earth’s lone Savior? To all the above, yes! Ultimately, by divine purpose and right, Jesus was made the Mediator between God and man, saving His people through a substitutionary death on the cross. And what we find in this text is a little “m” mediator in Zipporah, stepping up in a timely fashion to deliver Moses from himself, and foundationally from God’s justice, a wrath looming because

<sup>15</sup> Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 17:14

of his sinful neglect to align his life to God's covenant demands. Perhaps Moses should have confessed, not that he was heavy of speech, but that he was sluggish to do Yahweh's word. Zipporah flew into action, and in doing so the life of her husband was preserved. She understood something of the holiness of God, the blood requirement of God for sin, and she possessed sacrificial love for her **bridegroom**.<sup>17</sup> Moses will make it to Sinai with a delivered people, but not without a faithful God using means to get him and them to that point.

### III. Revelation is met with worship (loyalty and lowliness)

After Moses' close call and the mercy God lavished on his family through his wife's courageous act of obedience, the details of Moses and Aaron cover a lot of ground. The moving constellation of events presents God as the Sun around which it all orbits.<sup>18</sup> And here at the end of chapter 4, we see the warmth of His grace shining brilliantly upon Israel and her new Levitical leaders.

Moses heads back to Sinai, no doubt humbled. Aaron meets Moses there, as Moses debriefs his brother concerning what God communicated to him. And then, without spelling it out, they both head to Egypt, verse 29, **to gather together all the elders of the people of Israel**. And the Bible says that after Moses and Aaron were careful to speak all the words that the LORD had spoken to them, verse 31, the elders **believed**. And in this response by the elders we hear the faint echoes of Moses' doubt, don't we?<sup>19</sup> Exodus 4:1, "*But behold, they will not believe me...for they will say 'The LORD did not appear to you.'*" Moses' fears were ill-founded and self-directed, but God was faithful, as He ever is and will be to His loved ones. In fact, verse 31 leaves us with a scene that is beautifully and simply an experience which all God's people have tasted in unison, Exodus 4:31, "***And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.***" In this oppressive wasteland of enslavement and death, life at its finest blooms—humble worship of the living and exalted I AM, a welcome Visitor to His people. An unmuted Zechariah would speak with language echoing verse 31 stemming from the unfolding promises growing in Elizabeth and Mary, "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.*"<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

What are some valuable lessons here? First, we must know that the severity of God didn't disappear at the dawning of the gospel. Certainly, there is therefore now no condemnation for all who are in Christ Jesus. But for those in Christ, there is fatherly discipline. For those in Christ, there are obstinate sins which displease our heavenly Father. The warnings of the Bible, including this one lingering over Moses, are for us too. A second lesson, our most sincere expressions of humility don't excuse us from doing what God has clearly commanded of us. Our weaknesses are no excuse to do what is clearly taught by us in God's word, whether it be making time to deepen relationships, confessing that thing hidden deep inside, forgiving someone that's wronged you, or finally sharing the gospel with that neighbor, or praying more faithfully, or loving more demonstrably, or trusting the LORD more readily.

---

<sup>17</sup> Alexander, 107

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 84:11, "*For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.*"

<sup>19</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Preaching the Word: Exodus*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 1:68

You see, we've all lived a sputtering life, one that waivers between courage and cowardice, a life where moments bear out a real faith but moments that also bear out genuine doubt. But there was only One who never stammered before the face of a holy God. He didn't swerve in his submission to God's demands. Aren't we forever glad that Jesus didn't ask Yahweh to send someone else to deliver us? Thankfully, this servant would suffer our collective deservings and deliver us from death's vice grip. Consider the grace and the work of Christ, the One who was sent to exceed Moses in every way, delivering us, not from a mere watery grave out of Egypt, but, as John would say it, from a lake of eternal fire.<sup>21</sup> And that's something worth celebrating and commemorating as we partake of broken bread and crushed grapes—images of our Deliverer, deserving of our eternal thanksgivings.

---

### **Chart of similarities between Moses and Jonah<sup>22</sup>**

| <b>Theme</b>                                       | <b>Moses (Exodus) Jonah</b> |              |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|
| God calls prophet to preach in a foreign land      | Exodus 3:4–10               | Jonah 1:1–2  |
| Prophet tries to refuse                            | Exodus 4:13                 | Jonah 1:3    |
| Divine death penalty nearly imposed during travels | Exodus 4:24                 | Jonah 1:4–15 |
| Prophet learns his lesson                          | Exodus 4:25                 | Jonah 2:1–10 |
| God spares him                                     | Exodus 4:26                 | Jonah 1:17   |
| God renews the call                                | Exodus 4:27–28              | Jonah 3:1    |
| Prophet finally cooperates with the calling        | Exodus 4:29–30              | Jonah 3:3–4  |
| Call comes to successful fruition                  | Exodus 4:31                 | Jonah 3:5–10 |

---

<sup>21</sup> Revelation 20:15

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Stuart, NAC: Exodus, 136.