

AWAKENED FROM USELESSNESS

God's dealings with Moses

By Steve Zeisler

One of my eight-year-old son's favorite pastimes is doing the mazes in children's activity books. While some can be deciphered by visually studying the path from one point to another, others are quite complex. After drawing along, going right and left through a series of turnstiles, it may appear that you're going toward the goal at the end of the page, only to discover that there is a cul-de-sac, and the options have run out.

A mistake was made somewhere along the line, but it isn't obvious which of the 15 or 20 choices should have been made differently. You're at a stand-still. My son's ingenious solution to the problem is to draw through the line when he gets there, and continue on until he solves the maze to his great joy

COMING TO A DEAD END

Life, however, doesn't operate that way. It has some of the same characteristics as the maze. We make choices, assuming that we're headed in a particular direction, but often we find ourselves in what amounts to a cul-de-sac. We know some of the wrong decisions we've made that got us there, how other people have contributed to our problems, and finally the awful realization descends on us that we are not going to make it to our desired destination. We feel set aside, useless, stunted, and end up before God asking his help.

Verse 1 of Exodus 3 describes a man in a cul-de-sac:

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness.

Although Moses is one of the great heroes of the Bible, he was at an undesirable place at this point in his life. He was a man who had been set aside after a promising beginning. Rejected by both the tribe into which he had been born and the people who raised him, he was thrust out alone into the wilderness, under his father-in-law's dominion. At the age of 80 he had lived to a point when maturity, strength, and accomplishment should have been in full flower for him. Yet he was alone on the west side of the wilderness on a mountain, caring for another person's sheep, in one of life's cul-de-sacs.

In this series of messages we're looking at God's investment in the lives of people through his revolutionary invasion and overtaking of a life. Here, Moses experienced such an overtaking, and what God did for him can be our experience as well.

THE SOJOURN IN EGYPT

History tells us how God's people, at the end of the patriarchal era, moved to Canaan, the land God had promised them. For many generations they maintained a good relationship with their hosts. Joseph, one of the children of Israel, had risen prominently in Egypt, and because he served Pharaoh faithfully, his people were given a place of respect. By chapter 1 of Exodus, however, the situation had changed. What was supposed to be a temporary stay had extended to the extraordinary length of 430 years. In v.8, chapter 1 of Exodus we read:

Then a new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will

become even more numerous and, if war breaks out will join our enemies to fight against us and leave the country." So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built Pithom and Raamses, the storage cities for Pharaoh. The more they were oppressed the more they multiplied and spread. So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the field. In all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.

Open acceptance had changed to aggression and slavery, and it was clear that the stay in Egypt had grown painful. It is in that milieu that our introduction to Moses occurs. Chapter 3, v.1:

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now, and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. And the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. And now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

The interview with the bush had come to a critical point. God had explained himself in measure, and concluded by saying, "Moses, you are to be the man to deliver your people." Moses had a problem with that assignment, centering on two questions. One was "Who am I? Who am I that I should go?" The second question was "Who are you? If someone asks me your name, who should I say has sent me?" Verse 11 continues:

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may also say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and he said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" And God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord [this word is "Yahweh", or "Jehovah" as it is sometimes pronounced] the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" This is my name forever, and this is my memorial-name to all generations.

Alone in the wilderness with his sheep, on an ordinary day in his eightieth year, Moses was walking along and saw an astonishing sight, a bush that burned and burned, but was not consumed. Drawing closer out of curiosity, he engaged in an interview with God, a theological education about the nature and character of the Almighty. However, before we examine these truths about God more fully, we need to examine Moses' background. God's self-disclosure was made to minister to a man who had stopped believing he had value.

THE RISE AND FALL OF MOSES

Moses was born at a time when Pharaoh had ordered all male Israelite children to be killed at birth in order to halt their increasing population. His mother provided for his salvation by setting him adrift in the Nile in a papyrus boat. Discovering the boat, Pharaoh's daughter thought there was something extraordinarily attractive

about the child, and took him to raise as her own child. Josephus, the Jewish historian, related that Moses rose to a position of high command and authority in Pharaoh's court. A man of tremendous influence, he was put in the place of prominence and leadership among the Egyptians. His dual citizenship, however, was a source of confusion and pain, and eventually led him to a critical juncture. Attempting to deal with the misery of his people on his own, he drew his sword and killed an Egyptian who was mistreating an Israelite. He thought he was doing God's will, knowing deliverance was proper, but everything went wrong. Not only did the Egyptians decide to have his life in place of the man whom he'd killed, but his own people rejected him, saying "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" The Israelites hated him because he was an Egyptian, the Egyptians rejected him because he was a murderer and an Israelite.

Escaping to the wilderness, he met Jethro (also named Reuel), a desert chieftain. Moses married Jethro's daughter, and began a difficult marriage. They struggled in their own relationship and in the upbringing of their son. Chapter 2 relates the naming process of their son:

His wife Zipporah gave birth to a son, and he [Moses] named him Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."

The name Gershom means "a stranger there." Thus, there was a third element to his identity. He was an Israelite, raised an Egyptian, who was now a Midianite sojourner, married to the daughter of a priest of Midian, raising a son of mixed backgrounds, whose name is sojourner. He was indeed filled with confusion about who he was and what he was doing after such a promising beginning. It was in this context that he encounters the voice of God in the burning bush.

WHO AM I?

Moses' first question was "Who am I?" We can understand how he might have pondered that question. His background was based upon three different cultures, and his view of leadership had been influenced by various sources. He had a sense of his destiny, yet his effort to bring about that destiny had succeeded in getting him set aside, feeling himself useless, and shunted off into the wilderness. The question "Who am I?" was pertinent for Moses.

Our nation is a home to many first generation immigrants who can relate directly to Moses' experience of upheaval and change. Others of us, however, who have not experienced change in citizenship have seen the culture changing around us. We stayed in one place, but what's valued in this society continues to move from one thing to the next. Our efforts to assimilate in order to make our way in life are frustrated because the rules are in a constant state of flux. Women, for example, have a particularly difficult role in this society. We are told that they are to be domestic and nurturing, yet effective and productive in the work force. In our attempts to reach a level of accomplishment, we find more is expected than we thought, and thus our actions are not valued. It may result in some of the schizophrenia that Moses felt when he asked, "Who am I?"

We see here on the Peninsula that just getting shelter has become an extraordinarily difficult task. It was not long ago that life was simpler. People expected to get jobs, rent or buy a place to live, and raise a family. And yet the soaring inflation in real estate prices has literally changed the way people can live and function. It has applied pressure that didn't used to be there, giving people the sense that their contribution is valued less and the opportunities available to them are closing. Like Moses, we sense that we are sojourners in a strange land.

HARD TIMES

Another reason Moses might question "Who am I?" was not only based on his mixed upbringing, but also the difficulty of his present situation. He was a son-in-law to the priest of a foreign god, his family life was difficult, and his prospects for the future were null. His glorious beginning as a child in Pharaoh's court had come to a lonely end in the wilderness as a hired hand. He had descended in his own eyes, leading him to ask "Who am I that I should go?"

Beyond his uncertainty about himself was Moses' knowledge of the difficulty of dealing with Pharaoh and the children of Israel. "You're to be the deliverer." Moses questioned how that could be, saying to himself, "I

can't go to Pharaoh. He is a violent, hard-hearted, ruthless man. Going into the court of the Pharaoh to ask for the people's deliverance is foolishness. Likewise, going to his own people would be difficult. Pharaoh was hard-hearted, but the children of Israel were thick-headed. What if he should go as the deliverer and they refused to listen? They had already rejected his efforts to meet their needs one other time. So Moses asked the Lord, "Who am I to accomplish this deliverance?"

God's simple answer in v.12 was "Certainly I will be with you." In some respects, it didn't seem that he was responding to the question. We might expect God to take Moses through a long, personal discovery process to come to grips with his identity. But God replied, "It's not really important who you are, but I'll be with you." The unbroken companionship of the Lord is all we need." Once the character and commitment of God become dear to us it becomes relatively unimportant to unravel the questions which reveal our inadequacies. So Moses' next question was legitimate: "Who are you? Tell me about yourself."

HOLINESS AND REVERENCE

God had a great deal to say about himself concentrated in this discussion. First of all, the ground was holy. Curious about the phenomenon of a burning bush that was not consumed, Moses walked over to it. A voice identified himself as God and said, "Take off your shoes. This is holy ground. Don't come too close. You are dealing with holiness." Moses responded in reverence, hiding his face because he didn't want to look at God. But why was it holy ground now when the day before it was not? This mountain was holy ground for that time in history because God had chosen to reveal himself there. Any such revelation must be received with reverence. We must never get to the point where we respond to God casually. When God confronts us, we must have a sense of our own diminution.

The tendency of man is to locate places where God is supposed to be, whether they're the holy sites of ancient Israel, the cathedrals of Europe, or the shrines of contemporary evangelicalism. We want a static location so that we can go there and feel comfortable with God's dwelling place. However, God keeps picking new places to make holy so he can speak of himself and challenge our expectations.

Have you ever experienced your car radio bursting into flames? After listening to a Christian broadcast of songs, speakers, and interviews, something is said that is clearly God speaking directly to you, piercing your heart. It is so pertinent to your situation that you think the speaker has been reading your mail. Just as the bush on Mt. Horeb was on fire, the radio is aflame. The Lord is there invading, striking out to be known, and declaring himself in an obvious way. There needs to be a sense of hush, thankfulness that he would condescend to us.

Perhaps you're shuffling through your mail, the same type of material that you see every day. This time, however, an odd missionary letter shows up, somebody you'd forgotten about. You open it and the page is on fire. Once again, God is saying something to you personally that you weren't expecting, and a sense of holiness and reverence takes place in your experience. We must respond with reverence when the Almighty acts unpredictably, making the ordinary holy with his presence.

LORD OF HISTORY

Another thing Moses learned was that God kept his promises. Reminding Moses of his faithfulness in Israel's history, The Lord said, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God who has given a promised land to his people, the God who has made a commitment that he doesn't quit. I am, therefore, the God of the past. But I am also the God of the present who sees my people suffering in Egypt right now. I hear their cry and their oppression matters to me. I am also the God of the future, for I will take you to a promised land, flowing with milk and honey."

The voice speaking to Moses announced himself to know and be concerned about the past, present, and future of his people. He was not a distant deity, but a compassionate father who was concerned for his children's welfare. He cared about the plight of the children of Israel, and he responded mercifully.

The Scriptures declare that when we are with the Lord in glory that he will wipe every tear away with his own

hand and replace our sorrow with joy. It may be that his purposes requires a longer time to transpire before our suffering is alleviated, but it is never true that the Almighty turns a deaf ear to our pleas.

YAHWEH

The most important part of the theology lesson that Moses received comes in the beginning of v.13 when we find his question, "Who shall I say you are? What is your name?" For the Semitic people, sharing names was a sign of true intimacy, a powerful connection between people. A person revealed his identity, his true nature through this exchange. That is why we often find that names have been changed in Scripture. When God did something in a person's life he changed their name to signify the work that had produced the change. So God's answer was a tremendous statement of his concern for Moses and his people. He said, "I'll give you my name. It was the "memorial name" that they were to know him by for the rest of their history, Yahweh. It was his personal name, not a title or a description of God, but an indication of who he is at the core of his being. The word "Yahweh" is a conjugation of the ancient Hebrew verb "to be" or "to become". In v.14 he said, "I AM WHO I AM. Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, I AM has sent me to you."

Moses learned that the Lord had taken for himself the most limitless possible name. He could have named himself after one of his attributes or a summary of his actions. He could have named himself as Creator, or Savior, or any of his other titles in Scripture, but he chose none of those. Instead, he chose the most limitless expression of himself, "I AM." I am without peer, always present, always involved, unchanging. It's an extraordinary statement of his fullness.

To his surprise, Moses found his life radically overhauled in the few moments that it took to have this conversation. I would love to report about an unbroken string of successes in his life from that point on, but Moses did not proceed without failure. Chapter 4 depicts his struggles with the implications of what he had just experienced. In v.1 of chapter 4 he digresses to the original problem:

What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say? They may say, the Lord has not appeared to you.

He added in v.10 of chapter 4:

Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since thou hast spoken to thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.

Once again he outlined all of his inadequacies, the reasons why he couldn't do what God had called him to do. Verse 13 is the clearest statement:

Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever [else] thou wilt.

Moses continued to struggle with his own awareness of who he was and the remarkable change that had come upon him.

Regardless of his protests, God refused to let him quit. The Lord answered all of his objections, and then sent him to carry out the mission with Pharaoh. It was indeed as difficult as Moses thought it would be. Not only was Pharaoh hard-hearted, but his own people were recalcitrant. They responded by accusing Moses of wickedness, claiming to prefer the security of slavery in Egypt to deliverance. Yet the Lord was faithful to his promise.

Despite all the set-backs along the way, Moses' extraordinary mission was accomplished. Success was dependent on God's actions, not Moses. "Everything depends not on who you are, but who I am. I am sufficient for every responsibility, I am capable of doing what I send you to do."

Imagine a mountain in the wilderness with scruffy acacia bushes everywhere. As you walk along you see a bush on fire, but it is not consumed. Drawing closer you realize that you're in an encounter with God. We can allow that scene to illustrate our lives. We are ordinary acacia bushes, placed where we are for the Lord's use. We can be people in whom the presence of God takes up residence, blazing to the fascination of those around

us. There is life there that never goes out. It isn't the bush which is special, but God inside that makes it special. A life that seems to us to be stunted and useless, veered off into a cul-de-sac can be made new as Moses' life was. All that is required is the companionship of a limitless God.

Title: Awakened from Uselessness

By: Steve Zeisler

Series: Exodus

Scripture: Exodus 3

Catalog No:4173

Date: April 30, 1989

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