

# I WILL BE WITH YOU

*SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS*

**By Steve Zeisler**

Moses is among the towering figures in all of history. He shepherded six million former slaves through 40 years in the wilderness to freedom. He founded a nation that has endured dispersion and persecution and has lasted for more than 3,000 years. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—the five books of Moses—have shaped Western civilization and formed a basis today for ethics, law and human dignity.

Moses was an intimate of God. At the end of his life, it was said of him: "...no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face-to-face..." (Deuteronomy 34:10). He drank deeply from the depths of the presence of God. Yet, Moses' story in Exodus 3 is the story of a man at a low and broken place. As much as we remember his accomplishments, we should also meet him in his failures. The transformation from Moses the failure to Moses the leader came about through prayer.

We began a series on the prayers of the Bible last week and we are going to continue by looking at the prayer of Moses in Exodus, chapters 3 and 4. These chapters record a conversation between God and Moses, a prayer initiated by God. We will hear Moses ask questions of a God who is calling him to a different life. Moses' interaction with God in a burning bush demonstrates the heart of what prayer is: conversation. This prayer transforms Moses from his condition as a nowhere man in a nowhere land to a position of great service and influence.

The prayers we spoke of last week (Discovery Paper #4711) in Philippians highlighted the importance of making our requests known to God; starting just where we are with anxieties, uncertainties or confusion, and laying them before him. In this passage we will see that God also speaks to us and has greater things in mind than we have yet experienced. God intends to bring change, opportunity and hope that come about as a direct result of prayer. Consider:

**Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Exodus 3:1)**

Let's set this scene where the event of the burning bush and Moses' prayer takes place. The passage simply says that it took place on "the far side of the desert." One translation says "the west side of the wilderness" (NASB). "Miles past oblivion" or "the dark side of the moon" might be other ways to make the point that this is a place no one would want to be. Anyone who is part of the big story has no business wandering in the Sinai wilderness accompanied by sheep. Yet, this place is also called the mountain of God. God's presence at this moment in Moses' life and more dramatically in the future establish Horeb as a holy place.

When our lives have been shunted aside, we are often in places we have no wish to be: when events have overtaken us and pushed us out of the mainstream, or when we have made choices that we wish we could take back. When those times and places occur for us we ought to remember that just as for Moses, they may also be our "mountain of God."

The place where we are now may be where God will show up. We may look back and realize that because God was present, everything changed. Now let's read further, beginning at verse 2:

**There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."**

**When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"**

**And Moses said, "Here I am."**

**"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.**

**The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.**

**So [you] now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."**  
(Exodus 3:2-10, emphasis mine)

Moses, at this point in his life, was working on his third national identity. He was born into a Hebrew family, and was cast into the Nile by his mother to save him from Egyptian violence against the Hebrews. He was then adopted by an Egyptian princess and raised as a prince in Egypt. Reacting to the suffering of the Hebrews, he attempted a coup by killing an Egyptian soldier, hoping to start an uprising in which the people would throw off the yoke of Egyptian slavery. Moses heard the cry of his people and he attempted to deliver them. He wanted to do what God intended, but he did it prematurely. He did it in his own strength, and he did it out of bravado instead of faith. The Egyptians hunted him for murder and his own people rejected him as a failure.

Moses, now a murderer, ran from Egypt and headed off into the Sinai desert where he married a daughter of one of the priests of Midian, and became a Midianite—his third national identity. Moses' wife was an angry woman. He named his firstborn son Gershom, which roughly means, "I am a lost soul." You get some sense of who Moses was at that point: in the company of his father-in-law's sheep, wandering in a wilderness, and living in a difficult marriage. He had no awareness, in the prime years of his life, of a future worth anything.

At this point Moses encountered a curious thing—a bush burning without being consumed. Initially, Moses didn't see the bush as a dramatic display or an obvious visitation from God. Curiosity led to a world-changing conversation—

“Moses, Moses....” “Here I am.” Under the most unlikely circumstances Moses, the fugitive failure, found himself barefoot on holy ground.

Additionally, the word God gives to Moses at this point is disturbing. “I am going to send you back to Egypt where you are wanted as a criminal, where you have been ridiculed by your people. I am going to send you back to free the slaves.”

Moses can't believe it. Exodus 3:11-12a:

**But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”**

**And God said, “I will be with you.**

This is the heart of this prayer, of this discourse between God and Moses: “Who am I? I am the companion of sheep. I am the servant of my father-in-law. I am the husband of a difficult woman. I am a fugitive from Egypt. I am the ridicule of my people Israel. I am a nobody. I am a failure. Who am I?” God replies, “I will be with you.”

God never contradicts any of Moses' self-degradation. God never says, “Oh no, it's really not that bad.” He never once tries to redefine Moses' self-understanding. It won't do Moses any good to go back and retrace the steps of his messy life. That's not the best way to move forward; to try to fix all the broken, dark, twisted things. God says one simple thing: the reason you are going to be a savior to your people, the reason you are going to be Moses, the great law-giver, nation-maker, friend of God, writer of Scripture, is because I will be with you.

God says the same things to us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit who has taken up residence in our lives. Our companion is the one who says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. Where you go, I will go.” We are ordinary clay vessels with a great treasure inside. The friendship of God, the nearness of God, the commitment of God to go with us to where he sends us changes everything. That is the heart of this interchange—to understand what it means to have God fill up our lives and how that makes everything different.

If the Bible were a more simplistic religious document than it is, what we would find now is that Moses heads off to encounter Pharaoh. “God is my companion. He can do anything through me, boy, that's great to know—off we go!” But this is not a simplistic document, because Moses is a real person living a real life. His first thought is to object: “You can't possibly have gotten this right. You don't understand the difficulties we are dealing with. Okay, you'll be my companion, that's very important. But you don't realize the set of problems we're up against in using *me* in a role like this!”

What follows is a conversation in which Moses tells God that he doesn't know what he is doing. He tells him why this “I will be with you” thing isn't going to work. And, he is praying! Don't miss that. Moses' objection to God's plan is prayer as much as agreement would be. Arguing with God accomplishes more than hollow words of agreement. The Lord wants us to take his commands and presence so seriously that we want to obey them and will tell him why it's hard for us to do so. “I need for you to understand, Lord, what we're dealing with here. Here's why this is going to be hard....” God welcomes our objections, and when we're done, still ends up saying, “Now, go.” But he receives objections well and this is a great lesson for us in prayer. The first objection begins in Exodus 3:13:

**Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”**

The first issue Moses raises is a religious one. “I’m going back to Egypt where my own people think I’m terrible and where the Egyptians want me for murder. Egypt has a lot of gods: Isis, Osiris, Ra, Amen and Thoth. All of them have temples and priests, and some of them have armies. Pharaoh thinks he’s a god and he’s got a *big* army. Now, what I need is a religion. I need to galvanize support among people who disregard me completely. I need to be able to organize people around a religion that has a predictable outcome if I’m going to lead them anywhere.”

That is what Moses is asking for in asking for God’s name. And so, of course, the Lord gives him a name that is profound and problematic. He says, “Tell them I AM WHO I AM,” which is essentially mysterious and not religious at all in the way that Moses intended. This name will not easily get people marching in the same line doing what they’re supposed to do. It tells people that God is present and larger and more remarkable than they can conceive, that he can’t be contained easily in any temple or structure or set of expectations.

“You tell them my name.” I AM present, I AM powerful, I AM wise, I AM beyond and beneath and around, I AM who I AM. I AM mysterious, I AM love, I AM a consuming fire. Even all the great I AM’s together can’t contain him. The name YAHWEH or JEHOVAH that we use at times for him is a version of the Hebrew word “to be,” but even those don’t work as a religious containment for this God who is going to deliver slaves from Egypt.

You can imagine Moses’ thoughts: “Oh, great. Okay, the first question I ask, I end up with a God named “I AM...” The second objection is one of authority. Exodus, chapter 4 begins:

**Moses answered, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’”**

**Then the LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?”  
“A staff,” he replied.**

First, Moses needed a religion and got something he didn’t expect. “Well, at least, tell me how I can be authoritative. What if they say, ‘Why should we listen to you? Everything you say might be true, but *you* don’t impress us at all. What are your credentials? Where do you get authority? Why should anybody follow you or do what you say?’”

The authority problem is real. Most of us are used to authority being conferred externally. Moses is asking something like this: “Can I get a gold crown to wear, or a signet ring, or impressive robes? Can I earn a degree? Can I be granted a title? The divine answer is peculiar—Moses’ attention is drawn to the shepherd’s staff in his hand.

What Moses wants is a way to reject all the failure in his life—all the years he’s been a Midianite shepherd with no secure identity. God says, “Your authority is in the callused hand that is holding the shepherd’s stick. It is actually the failure in your life, the years you want to forget, that I am going to redeem.” Moses experiences a series of miraculous events: the staff becomes a snake, his hand turns leprous and then back to normal, and Moses is empowered to pull water from the Nile and turn it into blood. Moses receives no new mark of authority. His shepherd’s staff and the life lessons it represents will be enough for Moses to challenge Pharaoh by the power of the Lord.

In Exodus 4:10, Moses objects again:

**Moses said to the LORD, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”**

“Lord, I don’t talk good.” This would seem like a fairly small-scale objection compared to all that Moses has already heard. Moses will be God’s companion, sent back to galvanize a nation and speak to the people about God’s name and his purposes. People will follow him, and God will do miracles through him. The fact that he’s got a speech defect seems to be a rather small objection by comparison.

It is striking how often our fears don’t really deserve all the attention they get, or how many little things can give us a chronic sense of inadequacy. Fear of public speaking is a perfect example. Some people are terrified of public speaking even though they are smart, they use the English language well, and in private conversation they are fine. Put them in front of a crowd and they cannot do it; they are locked up. Occurrences like these can humiliate us so many times that they seem an unimaginable block to God moving us forward.

That, essentially, is what Moses is saying to God at this point. But if God can turn Nile water into blood, how important is eloquence? “Just get it right. Say it. You can stutter if you want and you can say it with poor diction. I’m the one who is going to make this happen. I am your companion.” But Moses’ objection seemed very real to him. Hear God’s answer in verses 11 and 12:

**The LORD said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”**

Then the last of Moses’ objections in verse 13:

**“O Lord, please send someone else....”**

Even after all this, Moses says, “Lord, the easy way out is for you to send somebody else.” God rejects this with sternness and Moses ceases his objections. Our God redeems broken lives, and gives us important work to do. It’s not only what God *can* do that is so compelling and important, it’s the *reason* these things are possible: because he will go with us. He doesn’t expect us to be better vessels; he just wants us to hold the treasure. He wants us to be available for him to express himself, for us to move forward so he can go with us and change the world.

These big salvation truths are important, but so are Moses’ objections: “I don’t think I can do this. You’ve got the wrong guy. In fact, I’m not going to do this. Send somebody else.”

“Yes, you are going to do it.”

“But you don’t understand my speech problem.”

“Yes I do. I’ll be your mouth.”

“I need a religion that will organize us.”

“No. You get a mystery.”

“I need authority.”

“Your authority is going to come from your life. The real stuff that makes up your real life, not some externally conferred thing. You already have within you the things that are going to make your life authoritative because I am present there.”

Finally, Moses is sent back to Pharaoh to lead his people to freedom. Moses' prayers are mostly objections to what God wants to do. He wrestles with the implications, and God answers him every time. I commend prayers of objection to you, but only if you're willing to listen and let God answer the objection. He has a mission for us that we can't ruin. Our failures don't disqualify us. Our failures are real, but they don't matter, because he says, “I will be with you.” A better version of you will not make the difference. The presence of the holy one of Israel will.

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