
Prayers

To God

Praise God for Creation

Thank God for the air you breathe, and pray for those who live in those parts of the world where pollution affects people's lives; in overcrowded cities, or in industrial areas where hidden pollution has the potential to kill people.

For myself

Ask the Lord to bless your home and everything that you have within it.

For others

We pray today, Lord God, for the leaders of the nations. May they deal with the great issues of our day, amongst which are the injustices of poverty, the stability of financial dealings, the emergence of new technologies and the need to inspire people throughout the world to engage properly with politics. Lord God, these things do not seem on the surface to be very spiritual, but we ask them for the peace of the world and the good of all. **AMEN**

Meditation

(reflection on 1 Cor 12:8-10)

When the Holy Spirit breathes,
The gifts of God are given and used,
And the church breaks out of its bondage:

Wisdom is spoken with passion and integrity;
Knowledge is gathered, stored and spoken out;
Faith works wonders which astound the world;
Healing is the experience of all who turn to Christ;
Miracles happen everywhere, many, and marvellous;
Prophecy is expected, weighed and acted upon;
Discernment breaks out amongst the people of God;
Tongues make real the divine words of the heart;
And interpretations reveal the wonders of God's love;

So yield to the Spirit of Christ.
Make sense of faith, of life and destiny
to become the person God intends you to be.

Bible Passage

Exodus 3:1-6

¹ As Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, he drove the flock through the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

² The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flaming fire which came from within a bush. He looked, and remarkably, although bush was burning, it was not consumed by the fire! ³ Moses thought,

'I must go over to see this incredible sight, and find out why the bush is not reduced to ashes.'

⁴ When the LORD saw that he was coming over to look, God called out to him from within the bush,

'Moses, Moses!'

He answered;

'Here I am'

⁵ God said,

'Stop coming closer! Take your sandals from off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.'

⁶ He went on;

'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.'

Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Review

This is a key passage for the entire Old Testament. You may feel this to be something of an overstatement, but Exodus 3 contains the story of God's extraordinary, powerful and moreover personal revelation to Moses. Of course, we have already encountered God within the stories of the patriarchs of Israel, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and we have come to know a fair amount about His character through the story of the Covenant with Israel. But at this point in the great Old Testament story-line, personal contact between God and His people seems to have been lost in the turmoil of slavery. So God decided to reveal Himself to the one person who was most ready to receive Him, who was Moses. Though he was an unlikely leader, the close relationship with God he was about to enter heralded a new revelation of God's character and purposes, and His desire to have a personal relationship with His own.

The chapter begins with the famous incident in which Moses was called aside by God because of the sight of a burning bush in the desert. It was an event which changed Moses' life completely and altered the course of history for the people of Israel, and ultimately for the whole world. Every one of God's great acts of deliverance recorded in Exodus (chiefly recorded in Exodus 12, 14, 16-19) all stemmed from Moses' obedience to God, and his personal relationship with Him.

At the beginning of the chapter, however, the picture painted by Scripture was not promising. Moses had spent the first half of his life as a pampered princeling in the court of Pharaoh, and

the second half as a nondescript shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro (also known as Reuel – see 2:18). He was certainly not rich and had not gained any wealth through the strange journey he had travelled, from the Egyptian court to the discovery of his ancestry, to the shepherd son-in-law of a ‘priest of Midian’ (3:1).

Incidentally, we should at this point pause to reflect on the fact that the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his later wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1,2), so we can assume that they worshipped the same God as the people of Israel, but outside of the covenant of His people. Israel had a difficult relationship with the people of Midian over the years, largely because of their resistance to Israel’s passage through their territory when heading for Canaan (Numbers 22f.), and Gideon defeated them later on at the time of the Judges (Judges 6,7,8). But we will certainly hear more of Jethro, later on in the story of Exodus (Ex 7:6,7).

Our passage now records that in the course of his duties as a shepherd, Moses took Jethro’s flock to Horeb, a mountain range in the Sinai peninsula, though it is almost impossible to be certain about exactly which mountain is called ‘Horeb’ (see ‘Going Deeper’, in the main Bible study). Most scholars reckon that the mountain named here as ‘Horeb’ is the same place as ‘Sinai’, the famous mountain on which Moses received the Laws of God. It certainly makes sense for Moses to lead God’s people to worship Him at the same mountain where he first met Him! Nevertheless, there remains a degree of uncertainty about the mountain and its location, but this should not stop us from appreciating the importance of the great events recorded here in Exodus.

In the same way that the location of the mountain has been disputed by some, the sight of a flaming bush in the desert (3:3) has often been the subject of rational explanations. People quickly dismiss the sight as if it was merely a natural phenomenon, impressive of itself, but no more. People have supposed that it was a trick of the light, the result of a dry wind scorching a plant, and more.

Such arguments are wide of the mark, for anyone spending as long as 40 years shepherding in the region as Moses had done would know the difference between an impressive natural sight and something completely out of the ordinary. Moses responded to the sight of the burning bush because what he saw was uniquely and mysterious, moreover, he saw *‘the angel of the Lord ... in a flame of fire’*. At the very least it was an extraordinary vision combining earthly reality and heavenly disclosure. Moses’ natural instincts drew him to this amazing sight, but he was stopped in his tracks as God called out to him. The sight before him was no picturesque bush phenomenon, or beautiful sunset seen through the haze of a desert mountain, it was God’s means to attract his attention and speak to him, and ultimately, the message was the important thing not the bush.

Moses began to respond to God, but His voice called him to stand still, and *‘take your sandals from off your feet’* (3:5). This was the first commandment God gave Moses, and in the light of the story of the Ten Commandment (Exodus 20), it was the first of many. In those days, it was common for people to remove items of clothing or shoes before coming to worship God, so Moses knew what was being asked of him. He felt the awesome power of God’s presence, and he hid his face in fear of what God might say and do (3:6). He was scared lest God would kill him, a fear that is difficult for us to understand but was very real for people of those days.

Now throughout Genesis, the forefathers had worshipped the Lord wherever they had met God; they had built altars and named places to worship God and remember Him (see Gen 12:7; 13:18; 26:25 etc.). Moses’ experience on Mount Horeb was not unlike that of the forefathers, but where God had previously revealed Himself and His Covenant to the forefathers in order to guide them towards becoming a great nation, God now needed Moses’ personal obedience and brave action, as we will find out in the rest of chapter 3.

Many years had passed since the time of the forefathers; the Old Testament itself is vague on this, and estimates range from between 200 and 500 years. However, the exact time does not

matter, for God was taking action at the right time for His people, who were in desperate need (2:25). As we will discover in the rest of chapter 3, God revealed Himself to Moses in order to show Moses something new about Himself, and also given Moses His specific work. All God required of Moses was that he be humbly obedient and responsive to His Word; but as we will see, the relationship between God and Moses was never straightforward, just as between God and Abraham. Yet God's will was done.

Going Deeper

Further Comments

Enormous amounts of time and energy have been spent on trying to locate the 'mountain of God', and the detailed text does give us some clues about location. This whole passage is full of symbolism; fire, commands, worship, but it is all focussed around the amazing call of God; 'Moses, Moses'. God previously had a fascinating relationship with some of the forefathers, but the contact He established with Moses was of a new order. It was a relationship which had to be strong enough to withstand the testing of many great events in the future!

Moses and Horeb, the mountain of God

The more you look at this passage of Scripture, the more amazing it becomes. Moses left Egypt a prince, having discovered his origins and chosen to take the tough road of identifying with his downtrodden ancestors. After committing murder and escaping from Egypt (2:11-15), he found himself living a nomadic life in the spartan deserts regions of Sinai doing the one form of work most despised by the Egyptian culture from which he came; shepherding (Gen 36:32-34; 37:1-6)! Nevertheless, shepherding was the occupation of his forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and although it would have come as a shock to Moses at first, he spent forty years working at it, not even earning anything from it, as Jacob had done (Gen 30:37f.). Moses was still looking after his father-in-laws' sheep at the age of eighty!

So it was that Moses led his flock in search of pasture-lands on the mountain slopes of the Sinai range. Interestingly, the Hebrew text of verse 1 hides a small directional guide as to where the mountain might be. The phrase I have translated 'through the desert' (3:1) is more literally translated 'behind the desert'. This would not mean much to us, but to this day, the ancient Bedouin people, and probably the Midianites and other Semitic tribes from which they are descended, take their directional bearings from facing eastwards. This means that it is probable that the phrase means something like 'westwards', but there are too many presumptions about this to make it a direct translation. What this does indicate to us is that the range of mountains containing 'Horeb' could be on the western side of the Sinai Peninsula, which is where the traditional 'Jebel Musa' or 'Moses Mountain' is found to this day. Other sites have been suggested in the Middle East, but I am not convinced that any stronger arguments have been produced for anywhere other than the traditional site.

In the book of Exodus, this mountain is called Horeb in three places; here, at the 'striking of the rock' incident (17:6) and before the Israelites set off on their wanderings after worshipping at the mountain (33:6). The mountain is also called 'Sinai', but this name is used on the occasion of the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19,20), when Moses went 'up the mountain' (24:16), and other incidents around the giving of the first and second set of Commandments (31:18 and 34:2f.) The confusion has never helped, but most people have settled down to accept that we have another incidence of two names for the same place (as with the two names of Moses' father in law – Reuel and Jethro - see yesterday's study). There are similar numbers of references to both Horeb and Sinai in the rest of the Old Testament, notably the occasion when Elijah fled to Horeb in 1 Kings 19:8 to hide in a cave and find God.

Moses, the burning bush, and the angel

The phrase the '*angel of the Lord*' is another way of talking about the presence of God (3:2). Moses saw the fire coming from 'within' the bush and perceived something of the presence of God, and it was an entirely new revelation. From this point onwards in the Old Testament, God is described as like a fire, guiding the Israelites through the desert as a pillar of fire, for example (Ex 13:21 etc.), and also purifying the people of Israel (Malachi 3:2). Fire is a symbol of purity and holiness which represents God's opposition to sin and also his 'wrath', an image which continues into the New Testament (e.g. in the prophetic words of John the Baptist; Matt 3:10) eventually coming to be associated with the Holy Spirit, coming as 'fire' on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3). It is impossible for us to fully appreciate what Moses must have felt like, seeing God within fire, for the first time. The awesomeness of the experience captivated his attention, and he approached the fire.

Moses approached the burning bush (3:3) intent upon investigating the angel he saw in the fire; it was a brave thing to do! God needed a man who would not be afraid of anything, someone who had an enquiring mind and was prepared to investigate things. In his younger days, Moses had keenly felt the injustice of the sufferings of his people; now, God needed to know whether his senses and judgement had been dulled by the years. They had not, and the next verse clearly indicates that the Lord was looking for Moses to respond (3:4) before he took the next step.

God's call

God then called out to Moses by speaking his name two times; 'Moses, Moses'. This form of address is common in many cultures today, but in Scripture it was a term of endearment. The fact was that God was calling Moses not simply towards the Covenant established with his forefathers, but a personal relationship through which he would lead his people out of slavery. This was a new type of contact, of a kind we have not seen so far in the Old Testament. It is even possible to say that by expressing endearment in this way, God was expressing love towards Moses, and although God had always acted out of love for His people, this was the first time in Scripture that He expressed it in words directly to the person concerned.

God's call of Moses also points forward to other great 'calls' in the Old Testament. Samuel was called in a similar way, for example (1 Sam 3:4), and the theme of fire was strongly present in God's call of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1f.). Coming forward to the time of the New Testament, we find that Paul speaks of being 'called' to be an apostle (Romans 1:1 and many other places), and Christians in general are those who are 'called' according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). What we often forget is that Moses was the first person God 'called' in this way. God had been working in his life for some time, but in a moment which was God's timing alone he was called to respond; and he did, he said 'Here I am' (3:4)

Coming into the presence of God

The command of God came as soon as Moses responded; 'stop coming closer ...' (3:5). It was another test of Moses' obedience, as the Lord set boundaries about what Moses could do in his presence. God was holy and pure, and Moses was certainly a sinner (and a murderer). The command God then gave was probably well understood by Moses, who would have known that it required him to worship God; 'take your sandals from off your feet' (3:5). Sandals were usually taken off when entering the house of another person, either as a guest or as a servant on an errand, and it was normal for people to take their sandals off when coming into the presence of God; that is, into any place of His dwelling. For that reason, God said; '... the place where you are standing is holy ground.' (3:5). This should not be thought of as saying that the place on the mountain or the mountain itself was holy, only that God's presence at that place at that time made it holy. The rest of Scripture is clear in saying that the Lord God is present everywhere, and not to be identified exclusively with any place (despite his special attachment with the Temple in Jerusalem).

Later on in the story of Exodus, Moses was required to convey precise instructions to the people of Israel about what they should and should not do in order to offer acceptable worship to Almighty God. The beginnings of this lay in Moses' call, and from this point, Moses was clearly required by God to be obedient in every detail of what he did.

Lastly, God revealed Himself by word to Moses as the God of his Fathers (5:6). This was perhaps what Moses had been looking for all his life. He had sought his ancestry and paid the price of that with forty years of servitude. Now, God was calling him to a different form of service!

Discipleship

Application

God wants a personal relationship

This amazing story has a great deal to offer us because it is the first Scripture which identifies things like personal call, love, and faithful response as part of a someone's relationship with God. Alongside this relationship comes the responsibility to do what God requires, just as Moses would soon learn. The way that God's personal attention to Moses fits together with His requirement of obedience takes the idea of a personal relationship with God to a new level. Throughout Old Testament times, the people of Israel looked up to Moses and were in awe of the relationship he had with Almighty God, however, they did not always fully appreciate that what God wanted was to have this kind of relationship with people!

Obedience in worship and fulfilment in Christ

In Christ, we are now in a place where we can have this personal relationship with God, and the story of Moses here in Exodus 3 reminds us that this personal relationship is not ours to do with as we wish. Our proper response to the love of God is that of obedient worship and service, and this is very clear within our passage here. Moses has to be obedient to the voice of God from the very beginning; failure at this point would be the end of the relationship. Obedience to every aspect of His call is required, for the Lord does not have a personal relationship with people for the sake of it. He has work to be done for the Kingdom, and He has made us to do this glorious and rewarding work. He calls us to be obedient to Him and do what He asks of us, and above all, He loves us and longs for us to respond to His revelation.

Ideas for what to do

- How would you describe your relationship with God? What has happened in your life to make you aware of God's nature and His love for you? Talk about these things to people you know and love, and do your best to get the benefit of their perspective on what has happened to you.
- Just a few words of love in a difficult situation can make a great deal of difference. Make it your aim to speak words of love and compassion as well as wisdom and justice, for the good of all you meet this day.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Try to imagine the scene described in this passage. Discuss with your group the pictures that come to you.

2. Why was it necessary for God to show a small degree of love towards Moses? How does God express His love towards you?
 3. What do you believe to be the significance of the 'holy ground' in verse 5? Discuss.
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Final Prayer

Make us fruitful in Your Kingdom, Holy Lord, God of power and of might. May all we do contribute to the universal effort of all Your saints to bring Your Word of Salvation to all peoples, so that they may have a chance to hear the Good News presented in a reasonable and appealing way. Bless us in all our endeavours we pray: AMEN
