

Prayers

To God

Praise God for Creation

We praise You, Jesus Christ, for the love You have placed at the heart of our world. Thank You for everything love means to us, in terms of relationships and also the love of a man and a woman in unity and marriage. Thank You for the institution of the family and our own families in particular, and bless us all with Your love, we pray. **AMEN**

For myself

Pray for those who are closest to you in your family. Ask the Lord to help you understand how you can show your love for them in a more helpful and expressive way.

For others

Pray for those who are trying to bring an end to the violence in Syria. There is civil war in the country, but it will have to stop one day. Pray for those who are truly seeking peace and for the Christian community in the land.

Meditation

You know everything about all things, O Lord;
and yet You give Your attention to me.

You hear the sounds of the Universe, O Lord;
and yet You listen to what I say.

You are truth and justice personified, O Lord;
and yet You save me from my sin.

You create new things every day, O Lord;
and yet You rejoice in all I do.

You speak Your Word to the world, O Lord;
and yet You whisper in my ear.

So forgive me when I am selfish, O Lord,
and fail to give my all to You.

Bible Passage

Exodus 3:7-12

⁷ Then the LORD said,

'I have plainly seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have truly heard their cry which has arisen because of their taskmasters. ⁸ I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians, and lead them up out of that country to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ Now, indeed, the outcry of the Israelites has come to me, and I have also taken notice of the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

¹¹ But Moses said to God,

'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?'

¹² He said,

'I will be with you; and this will be a sign for you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will all worship God on this very mountain.'

Review

At the heart of the book of Exodus lies God's call to Moses, a broken and old man, but someone who was ready to respond to God and receive a call to do His will. This passage of scripture today contains God's analysis of the situation (3:7,9), His promised solution to their immediate problems (3:8), and His personal call to Moses to do the work to put this plan into action (3:10). At the end of this passage, we begin to hear Moses for the first time in this encounter, speak about his own reaction to what has happened. His caution is understandable (3:11) and God's consequent personal promise very reassuring, but this is the beginning of a more substantial discussion between Moses and God, as we will discover in coming days.

It is impossible for us to guess exactly how low Moses was after the failure of his futile attempt to lead the people of Israel (2:11-15) and the forty years or more he spent in the service of his father-in-law. But still, despite his bruised spirit, Moses had sufficient faith to reply when God drew his attention (3:1-6), though there remained a large gap between Moses and Almighty God, and it needed to be bridged. Today, preachers like to draw attention to God's preparation of Moses for the task ahead through his quality training at court and his awareness of history and his ancestry. Too many think of Moses as a ready-made leader, merely awaiting God's call to take up his rightful place as the leader of his people. But as a whole, Exodus chapter 3 shows the lengths God had to go to persuade and cajole Moses towards the place where he would be able and willing to do His will.

Most of today's passage is a speech by God, in which he outlines what was faced by the people of Israel and promises a salvation. But Moses knew and we already know about the situation in Egypt (3:7). The real surprise comes next, for immediately after this, God tells Moses the solution to the problem, and for the first time in Scripture we read His promise to take His people back to their own country (3:8), a land *'flowing with milk and honey'* (3:8). When Jacob finally agreed to come to Egypt, he did so only under the extreme pressures of famine and a desire to see his favoured son, previously believed to be dead (Genesis 46,47). It took a great deal to get God's people out of Canaan and it would take even more to get them back there.

Canaan, the land we know as the 'Promised Land', is not called by this name here (3:8), but this is the first time we read words like this, which describe it;

'... a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.'
(3:8)

This formula of words becomes the core description of Israel's ultimate goal during the wilderness wanderings (see also 23,23,33:2,34:11, Deut 7:1, 20:17). However, each part of this description apart from the phrase *'flowing with milk and honey'* can be found in one or other of God's famous promises to the forefathers, in which he promised them a land to live by (see Genesis 12:1f., 13:14, 15:7,18f., 17:8). So God's promise here is consistent with Israel's past and it looks forward to the future; in general, His promises are eternal and not subject to temporal change.

The breadth of this vision was probably not beyond Moses' grasp, as there can be little doubt that it was once Moses' own desire to see his people set free. However, Moses was not able to see that the task was achievable. His response to God was this, *'who am I ... to lead the Israelites,'* (3:11) he said. He was haunted by the knowledge of his own past failure, and was as yet unable to appreciate the extraordinary power available through the relationship God was offering him.

The more we read about Moses' call in Exodus 3 and 4, the more we realise that he was like someone who had experienced some form of emotional breakdown, and God had to build him up. He was not merely reticent about doing God's will because it was right to be humble before the Lord (3:11), he was truly broken before the awesomeness of God and the task he was called to do. Moses' call was not just about responding to God at the 'burning bush' (3:1-6), or receiving the great revelation of the name of God (tomorrow in 3:13-15). His call was an extensive conversation in which Moses was laid bare before God, so that all his personal inadequacies were exposed.

The task required of Moses was extraordinary, and God had to do a great work in this old and bruised man in order to prepare him for the spiritual task ahead. Up to this point, Moses' spiritual preparation for the role of liberator was non-existent, even though he possessed many good qualities for the work. However, the seed of faith had begun to grow in him as he responded to the burning bush. This was all God required. Moses was the man he wanted to do the job for Him (3:10), as He made very clear!

Moses' question to God was not perhaps what God wanted, but that was the nature of the man and the nature of people generally. We tend to question God! The reply God gave at the end of our passage was therefore crucial. It contained the words *'I will be with you'* (3:12), which were not just a form of re-assurance to Moses, they were the exact same words spoken to the forefathers Isaac (Gen 26:3) and Jacob (31:3) when they needed a word from the Lord to help them face the future, and they were closely associated with God's Covenant promises to His people (Gen 26:3, 31:3, 48:21). The holy task of taking God's people out of slavery and back to the land God had already given them was given to Moses, and God was not going to take 'no' for an answer!

All of us feel small next to the great works of God, indeed, if we did not, then we would have turned true faith on its head. Moses could no more 'fake' humility than we can, for the Lord knows all things. We now look back on Exodus, knowing that God's prophecy in this passage was fulfilled, and Moses did indeed accomplish the great task of deliverance. This should encourage us to follow the Lord's guidance, for He will do what He intends.

Going Deeper

Further Comments

There is great deal to study in this passage. We know all about the plight of Israel, but the description of the land to which God wanted to take His people is powerful and revealing (3:8). Then the commissioning of Moses in verses 10 to 12 has much to teach us about Moses, and indeed ourselves; and the final promise of a sign is intriguing. Who would normally think of 'worship' as a sign of God's work?

God's covenant promises and an oath

God had always intended His people to live in the Promised Land of Canaan, but it appears that whilst they were in Egypt, in slavery, they lost sight of this, having settled into life in Egypt. This was a key part of the Covenant promises of God to the forefathers (see above, and Gen 17:8, 22:17 etc.) which God needed to bring home to Moses in a clear and memorable way; but in speaking about it, God emphasised His compassion for the people where they were. They needed to be liberated and moved on, but they would probably not go unless they knew that their God cared for them in their distress.

There are two verses in this passage which speak of Israel's slavery (3:7,9). Each tells us that God has heard the plight of His people and intends to free them. This is clear from everything in Exodus so far, so why is it repeated like this? Each verse contains some strong language in Hebrew! Not the strong language of swearing or oaths, but strong language of emphasis. For example, in verse 7, the word for 'I' is emphasised, telling us that there can be no mistaking God's attention to His people's plight. If you compare my translation with other Bibles, you will see that I have placed the words '*plainly*' and '*truly*' to express this feature of the verse. We are to be in no doubt about God's intentions. What follows in verse 8 is a prophetic description of God's deliverance, but before we study this further, we should notice that the next verse (3:9) echoes verse 7; '*now, indeed, the outcry of the Israelites has come to me ... I have taken notice ...*' This thematic repetition, each side of verse 8, draws our attention both to God's intention to save his people and the prophecy which it surrounds. Most people are not used to literary structures today, because people write or say things as they please; but most languages have patterns which give emphasis, and we need to study them to recognise them!

Deliverance into a new 'Promised Land'

The real emphasis is on verse 8. This is God's prophetic promise of a 'good and spacious' land, 'flowing with milk and honey'. The second of these descriptions has transferred into English as an image of luxury and opulence, but that is unfortunate. These phrases tell us a great deal about God's intentions for His people. Firstly, God promised His people that their land would be 'good'. This comes from the very character of God who made all things, and saw that they were 'good' (see Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31 etc.). Exodus 3 is the first passage in which God's Covenant promises are spoken of in this way, and it reminds us that God always intended His plan of salvation to re-establish the original 'goodness' of the world and its people. Secondly, the land promised was 'spacious' or 'broad'. This is one of the many places in Scripture which tell us that God's salvation is like being brought out of a

restricted area into wide open space (see also psalm 66:12 and Psalm 23:1,2). The cynic could suggest that Egypt was a far larger country than Canaan, and Canaan was always a rather crowded country; but this passage is not about blunt facts but about vision, and the language is poetic and draws us in to believe that God has something better for His people.

'flowing with milk and honey'

Exodus 8:3 is the first place in Scripture where we find the idea of the Promised Land as a place 'flowing with milk and honey'! It is such a common phrase today, we read past it without realising the significance of its first use. The word translated 'flowing' is the one used to describe the oozing of milk from a sheep or goat's udder, and honey was a naturally occurring food which abounded when the land was fertile and well-vegetated (allowing bees to thrive). It was therefore a very powerful image which God intended should draw the imagination of the people of Israel in their captivity, as He needed the Israelites to want to leave Egypt. At the time, the people of Israel were shepherds and goatherds, and they lived from the produce of their animals. However, the labour forced on them (probably with taxes) would have made it difficult for them to sustain their herds, their traditional way of life, and means of support. A 'land flowing with milk and honey' would be just what people wanted!

Much has been made by some people of the list of nations occupying the Promised Land (the Canaanites, the Hittites etc – see verse 8). There is a possible explanation of each of the different people represented, some more than others; and clearly, they all occupied parts of the Promised Land around 1500 years BC. The list may be representative rather than purposefully accurate, as other similar lists of nations have different nations and numbers of nations (see Genesis 15:19-21 or Deuteronomy 7:1f.). It will take a long time to describe each of them here, so I will leave any detailed description of them until our studies reach those parts of Joshua and Judges where Israel faces these nations directly in competition for the land.

The conversation between God and Moses continues

There are many things within this part of Scripture which are new, and we now meet another major topic which is essential to our understanding of God's work with people throughout Scripture and the life of the church, to the present day, and it is this: it is God's express desire to do His work of salvation through the people He calls to do this work. Now, we are used to hearing this said in a Christian, New Testament context, but here it is in Exodus! Having called Moses and obtained his response (3:4) and worship (3:5,6), God then called him to do the work of deliverance He wanted to have done (3:10). Even the words used in this verse, 'Now, go! I am sending you ...' are typical of Scriptural words used elsewhere in which God sent prophets and kings, and eventually apostles (in the New Testament) to do His will (see Numbers 22:20, Jonah 1:2, 3:2 etc.). But although we can look back on these words and be inspired by the power of them over centuries to achieve God's great works of salvation, Moses only knew that God was calling him to go back and face his previous failure. He was called to go and do what he had previously tried to accomplish in his own strength and failed. It was a daunting task.

Moses' response was understandable, and the circumstances of what happened make it extremely unlikely that his reticence was some kind of false humility (see above). Moses' words 'who am I?' prefigure David's identical and famous response to God's Covenant promise to him to make of him an 'everlasting house' from whom would come a king who would 'establish a kingdom for ever' (2 Sam 7:13,18). The deliverance of whole peoples from slavery and the establishment of kingdoms can only be the consequence of godly commissions and ministry; works of God which have a purpose on the world stage and which affect our own, real, history. There is only one response any person can give to such a call; 'who am I?'

God's final promise to Moses is not new to Scripture, however, having been given to Isaac and Jacob before (Gen 26:3, 31:3). God said to Moses 'I will be with you.' The great importance of this text, however, is to reassure us that in the midst of doing new things and revealing more of Himself to Moses than any man previously, God was not acting differently than He had before. His desire was always to be 'with' His people in the midst of the tasks He required of them. By promising to be with Moses, God was continuing a pattern of revelation that would lead, one day, to the revelation of His own son Jesus Christ, Emanuel 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23).

A promise of fulfilment

Lastly, God offered Moses a sign for his own benefit, as a guarantee of his presence and a promise of success in the days to come. He prophesied that if Moses would follow His commands, then he would return to the mountain on which he stood with the people of God, to worship Him. This kind of 'fulfilment' sign is not one with which we are familiar today, for it takes a great deal of faith to believe. Nevertheless, the idea that God would add on a blessing to the fulfilment of the deed He asked of Moses was simple enough in its day. Certainly, after Moses eventually agreed to work with the Lord, his initial objective does appear to have been to return to the mountain to worship God (Exodus 19).

Discipleship

Application

'Liberation' theology, or God working through people?

There are a number of features of this passage which we can relate to as Christians without too much difficulty. Some pastors and theologians have made a living out of developing the ideas of 'liberation' contained in this and other texts, relating it to the saving work of Jesus and describing their work as 'liberation theology'. However, the more obvious connections we see are to do with the nature of Moses' call, and the idea that God wants to do His work in the world through His people. It is not that God cannot work with sovereign power; He does this all the time, and in ways that we do not always know about. However, His greatest desire is to bring the saving work of Jesus to the attention of all peoples, and He does this primarily through calling people to do His will in the world, and promising to be with them; just like Moses.

Protesting our humility

All too often in the life of the church, we have the habit of protesting our humility or lack of qualifications, or our limited availability to do the work of the Lord. If we claim to have faith in God and His son Jesus, however, no protest is ever sustainable, for it only exposes our lack of obedience and faith. If God is calling us, then it is absolutely right, if not essential, that we should feel inadequate and unworthy. That is precisely the right qualification for doing the work of God, for us as it was for Moses. In addition, if we protest further, this is not self-effacement or humility, but sin; the sin of unbelief in the power of God to do as He pleases with us. Our aim must be to follow Moses' example, and submit to God's call, whatever the cost.

Ideas for what to do

- May I ask you how old you are? I know that's cheeky, but our age is an important factor to God and in a positive way. God uses people old and young in the Old Testament, and it is important for us to realise that age is no barrier to God's power to use us. I ask you to consider, do you really believe that?
- Pray for the leaders of God's people, that they might feel His love and be effective in using His power.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group your own reaction to verse 8. It is a complex verse full of God's promises, but what do they mean for us today?
2. Have you ever felt the hand of God on your life, or the voice of God, calling you to serve Him? Share your answers with others in your group.
3. In what ways do we experience the presence of God with us today?

Final Prayer

You have called many good people over the years, Lord God, and some have responded and done Your work, but not all. We praise You, Lord Jesus, because You are always calling people to do Your will; and we ask You to make Your will clear for each of us who pray. May we make ourselves available to You without condition. AMEN
