

“THE SERVANT OF THE LORD” – A Study of the Life of Moses**“Beating around the Bush” (Exodus 4:1-31)**

Moses had made two excuses not to obey the call of God to return to Egypt. God had reassured him that He would be with him and had given precious promises that He would deliver Israel through his hand. But that was not enough for Moses. He knew from his own bitter experience that the Israelites were prone to reject him. The irony is that although Moses feared that the people would not be willing to trust in God’s plan, he himself was not willing to trust the Lord.

Throughout this exchange Moses’ problem is that he is too self-oriented, rather than God-oriented in his thinking. There are many lessons for us to learn from this incident. One commentator put it well,

One of the catch concepts of Christianity (and, significantly, of the world) is that of one’s self-concept or self-image. We seem to find a “poor self-image” the basis for crime, improper behavior, marital failures, and who knows what all. Now I do not wish to be understood to say that “self-image” is all hogwash. Much of it is, but not all of it. I am not saying that we should never consider the area of self-concept. I am saying that it is, at best, a symptom, more than it is a cause. Moses, we might say, had a bad self-image, but God did not work to change his self-image. Instead, God focused Moses’ attention on Himself, by revealing Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the “I AM.” When Moses grasped the greatness of the God who called him, then his self-image began to revolve around God, not man. The greatness of Moses is to be found in the greatness of the One who called him and who sent him. God listened to Moses’ objections founded on his self-concept, but He corrected Moses by focusing his attention elsewhere.

EXCUSE THREE – UNCONVINCING

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee. And the LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand?

And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the LORD said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. And the LORD said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land. (v1-9)

The third excuse Moses gave was, “*But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.*” Even though God had just promised, “*And they shall*

hearken to thy voice” (Exod. 3:18), Moses refused to accept the assurance of the Lord. He was openly doubting God’s explicit promises. This was rank unbelief! This lack of faith and unbelief afflicts many believers today. We are frankly afraid to obey God’s word because we are paralysed by fear and doubts.

The Lord could have given up on the stubborn and faithless Moses at this point. I think most of us would! But God is gracious and longsuffering to the frailties of His weak servant. He then gave Moses some three physical signs to reassure him and to convince others. The Lord will use a simple instrument like a rod or a hand to illustrate His great power.

The first sign was turning his rod into a serpent when he threw it on the ground and when he picked the serpent up again by the tail it turned into a rod. The serpent was a symbol of Egyptian worship that represented power and life to the Egyptians. The ruler often wore a coiled snake on his headdress. So when Moses was able to control a serpent, this emphasised that Jehovah was supreme over the religions and powers of Egypt.

The second sign was turning Moses’ hand to leprosy when he thrust his hand into his bosom. Then when he placed it back again it was healed. Leprosy was the most feared disease of that time. A person who contracted leprosy became a social outcast. It was a death sentence of the worst kind as it was incurable. This sign emphasised that God had the power over life and death; sickness and health.

The third sign was for Moses to pour out water from the Nile that would then turn into blood. The Egyptians worshipped the Nile, as it was the source of their fertile soil. They regarded the river as divine. So when Moses was seen to have the power to turn the precious water source into blood it would be another powerful statement of Jehovah’s power over the gods of Egypt.

The Lord promised that these signs would accredit Moses’ authority before the people of Israel, *“That they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.”* They would also speak to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, who had tried to destroy Israel, that the God of Israel could destroy them. So Moses had to simply obey the Lord and God undertook to take care of him with these spectacular sign miracles.

EXCUSE FOUR – LACK OF ELOQUENCE

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say. (v10-12)

The fourth excuse that Moses made was that he lacked the eloquence to speak for the Lord, *“O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.”* Once again Moses focused on his own perceived lack of credibility. This is in reality a deceitful piece of false humility, as Stephen revealed that he was, *“mighty in words”* (Acts 7:22).

The Lord replied with a series of rhetorical questions, *“Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?”* This reminded Moses that God not only knew his limitations but He had divinely ordained them as the sovereign Creator. The Lord then commanded Moses to go and promised to take care of this perceived problem by

reassuring him, “*I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.*” God does not need a clever and eloquent vessel but a holy and willing one in order to speak through.

The Lord doesn’t need us to have some exceptional talents in order to use us. He knows what we have before He calls us. For whom God calls He enables. The Lord just wants us to be available as an empty vessel for Him to speak through and use. He will take care of the rest. Never hide behind your perceptions of your abilities to reject doing the will of God. It is not the power of the messenger but the power of the message that is critical. God wants the hearer to be gripped by the message rather than the shifting sands of human personality.

EXCUSE FIVE – UNINTERESTED

And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God. And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs. (v13-17)

The final excuse is more a deliberate refusal to obey the command of God. Moses effectively said to the Lord that although he had heard Him correctly he just did not want to go and that He should send someone else, “*O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send.*” Moses understood exactly what God wanted him to do but he just did not want to do it! He had ran out of excuses. Instead of saying, “Send me!” Moses just bluntly said, “Send someone else!” Moses was *unwilling*, not *unable*. That is the bottom line.

This persistent refusal to obey the Lord’s command angered the Lord. This time the Lord just told him to go and informed him that He would appoint Aaron to speak for him. He would accommodate Moses’ wrong desire. This would mean that Moses was handicapped in having to rely on the inconsistent Aaron and he would miss out on the great privilege of speaking for God directly. Aaron may have been a smooth talker but his substance was not always right. Moses would learn the hard way that it would have been better to just obey the Lord without questioning (cf. Exod. 32:1-12; Num. 12:1-6). All he needed was the Lord.

And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. And the LORD said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life. And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand. And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn. (v18-23)

It is to Moses’ credit that he does not argue anymore with the Lord. He seeks permission from his father in law to return home. It is notable that Moses does not give the whole detail of his

encounter with God at the burning bush. He also does not reveal the real purpose for his return to Egypt but makes the excuse that he wants to visit any family members still alive.

This Lord graciously gave Moses a further assurance to calm his heart as he stepped out in obedience to obey His command. This assurance was, “*for all the men are dead which sought thy life.*” God had already taken care of that problem for Moses. The reference God makes here to Israel as “*my son, even my firstborn*” is surely a backdrop to the next incident.

And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision. (v24-26)

This is a sad incident in the home of Moses. Clearly he had not been leading his home spiritually in the prescribed manner (cf. Gen. 17:9-14). We are not told why he neglected to embrace the mark of the covenant by faith for his son. God confronted him because of his compromise. This was a deadly serious encounter.

A leader cannot have double standards – one in public and one in the home. There would be no point Moses teaching the fathers of Israel to lead their homes when he himself failed in such an obvious manner. Furthermore if God was going to deal with the sins of Pharaoh by slaying his firstborn, He must judge the sins of Moses in the same manner. May be Moses thought that the issue of circumcision was not a big thing especially as he no longer lived among Israelites. However, if Moses was going to be a leader he must be first be a leader in the little things before he could lead in the big things.

Moses and his family would learn that God does not overlook sin. Zipporah was right to point out the sin and take action to spare the lives of her family even if we judge her manner was not right in how she spoke to her husband. She proved to be a valuable “*help meet*” in this critical moment in her husband’s life and ministry. It is to Moses’ credit that he records this embarrassing incident of his own failure as a father. Often the greatest place of failure for leaders is in the home. The home is a critical laboratory of our faith.

Moses may have been broken and humbled by his wilderness years, but he was certainly far from perfect. God does not call perfect people, as there are no sons of Adam that match such a criteria on this planet. Believers should not expect perfection in their leaders but they do have the right to expect reality. The very fact that God could use such a weak and faithless man like Moses to deliver Israel only reveals that God was the real power that delivered Israel. Even the failures of Moses rebound to the glory of God. Ligon Duncan rightly notes,

The story of God’s servants in the Bible is not the story of sinlessly perfected servants. You can look at Abraham, you can look at Isaac, you can look at Jacob, you can look at Joseph, you can look at Moses, you can look at David, all of them, save one, are filled with faults, and foibles and flaws. God is the Savior. He’s the true Saviour. Moses is His instrument. But it’s not through Moses’ courage, it’s not through Moses’ eloquence, it’s not through Moses’ native abilities that the people of God are going to be saved. So even in this instance of Moses failure of faith God is just reminding us again that in the final analysis it’s He who saves us.

The call of God and Moses' acceptance meant that Moses is held to a higher standard of accountability, "*My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation*" (James 3:1). The point James is making here is that because leaders words affect the lives of others they must be held to a stricter judgment, as they are more accountable. That is always the way in spiritual leadership in the OT and the NT. People rarely rise spiritually higher than their leaders.

And the LORD said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD who had sent him, and all the signs which he had commanded him. And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: And Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped. (v27-31)

Moses' life reveals that there are two great dangers in leadership. There is the danger of presumption and self-will. This leads us to act rashly in the flesh. There is also the danger of fear and unbelief that paralyzes us from doing the revealed will of God. Both are equally dangerous extremes and we are prone to fall into the snare of these extremes at different times of our lives.

The Lord had made a number of promises to Moses. As he was making the long and lonely journey back to Egypt, the Lord was already beginning to fulfill some of these. God can arrange all of these circumstances in perfect harmony to accomplish His sovereign will. The first was that Aaron was sent by God to meet him. What an emotional and joyful reunion that must have been after 40 long years of separation! This journey from Egypt to the barren wilderness to meet a brother he had not seen for four decades by the 83 year old Aaron took faith.

God also graciously touched the hearts of the people of Israel. Then when Moses revealed the message of deliverance from the Lord and performed the signs he had the encouragement of witnessing, "*And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.*" This must have lifted the heart of Moses. This proves that God's word can always be trusted and that Moses' unbelief and fears were unfounded. That fact is still true today. The great "I AM" is with us and He never changes. When you are in the centre of His will, all the obstacles just melt away.

*Begone, unbelief,
My Saviour is near,
And for my relief
Will surely appear;
By prayer let me wrestle,
And He will perform:
With Christ in the vessel
I smile at the storm.*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do we look for excuses to disobey God's will?

2. What were the two extremes Moses had in his thinking over the forty years?

3. Why must church leaders be held to high standards?

4. What have you learned from this chapter?
