

I Am Who I Am
Exodus 3:1-15
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Intro:

We have good family friends whose kids are all grown. But when their kids were younger, the oldest, who is a boy, had a bent towards adventure, mischief, and fun. He still does in his late 30s. In High School, he was assigned a school project to do a video story. He came up with an elaborate adventure with a chase scene that culminated in him standing on a railing of a bridge over a river a few miles from their house. The story ended with his character getting shot, catching on fire, and falling 30 feet to the river. Well, he was not going to have these things happen off camera or some special effects that were added in afterwards. He was going to have all those things filmed. (*Please don't try this at home!*) He wore several layers of clothes, doused his back with alcohol, and when the time came, he pretended to be shot, lit his back on fire, and then fell into the deep part of the river 30 feet down. Of course, he didn't tell his parents anything about this until the video was done and he could just show them on camera. Most parents would have freaked out, these parents were concerned, but pretty used to his crazy stunts.

Fire is very destructive, it can do a lot of damage in a short amount of time. And that's a pretty amazing thing to be on fire, or surrounded by fire, but not burn up. But God accomplishes the impossible for His people – think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into the fiery furnace by an angry king in Daniel chapter 3, but they are not burned up. Isaiah 43:2 says: "*When you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you.*" And sometimes God shows up as fire, fire that does not consume. Today's passage, Exodus 3:1-15, is a very well-known, iconic story of the burning bush.

In the second chapter of Exodus we have gotten a picture of Moses who was raised in Pharaoh's house for the first forty years of his life but left to spend the next forty years in Midian raising a family and tending sheep. The Egyptians absolutely despised shepherds so Moses must have felt some level of humiliation at being a shepherd, and it must have felt strange being in the middle of nowhere after living in the center of affluence. But if Moses had stayed in Pharaoh's house, in the palace, he would have a really rough time leading the people into the wilderness. Here is a forty-year time of getting the luxuries of the royal life out of his system and ingraining in him the grit and fortitude to be out in the wilderness and the desert. D.L. Moody said, "Moses spent 40 years thinking he was somebody; 40 years learning he was nobody; and 40 years discovering what God can do with a nobody."¹

Now, to the turning point in Moses' life. The first 6 verses of the chapter show us that

1) God Reveals Himself (vv. 1-6)

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off

¹ Charles Swindoll, *Great Lives: Moses, A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 20.

your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”⁶ And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Now that is not something that you see every day – a fire that is not actually consuming anything with the voice of God calling out from it. I think most of us assume that if God was speaking to a human being, it would be from the sky, parting the clouds like at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration. But God is associated with fire; our God is a consuming fire. He will use a pillar of fire in the wilderness to lead and be present with Israel. Certainly, the fire that burns but needs no fuel is an indication of the nature of God Himself. He needs nothing outside of Himself. He does not require a source, a fuel, a food to feed on in order to continue existing.

Moses’ initial response to the burning bush is curiosity: “What is going on here?” But then God identifies Himself and Moses hides His face in fear. It’s not a bad thing that Moses hid his face and was afraid to look at God. Later in Exodus God tells him that he could not look on the face of the Lord and live (Ex. 33:20). God tells him not to come near and to take his shoes off. This random spot in the wilderness is not holy in and of itself, it is holy because God is there. And there has to be some distance and some accommodation here, because an unholy man is walking into an encounter with the divine, perfect One who is holy and righteous, not able to be in the presence of sin. There is an infinite distance between the Creator and His creatures. But when God comes down, when God appears, He commands respect and He sets the conditions for how someone can approach Him. We sinful humans cannot come into His presence however we would like. We must follow the conditions He has set or we would die in His presence.

So, God announces Who He is in v. 6 – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – because He has come to call Moses to his ministry. Can I just give a little caveat here that not many calls into ministry are this dramatic? I mean, maybe there are pastors or missionaries out there that saw some extraordinary vision or had an extremely vivid word from the Lord calling them into service. In the Scriptures that happens: the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6 was caught up in a vision of God’s glory when God asked “*whom shall I send?*” He responded to with: “*Here I am. Send me.*” The 12 apostles were just going about their daily routines and vocations when Jesus walked up to them and said, “Follow me.” But the vast majority of people that I have known in “professional ministry” (and I put that in quotes because every Christian is called into ministry, not just the ones who get paid for it) have not had a dramatic voice or vision of Jesus that sent them into ministry. I certainly never did. We discerned the giftings and talents that God has given us and when we felt both the internal desire and urging towards ministry and that was combined with an outward call from a church or ministry, then we walked through that open door. I would describe my call to ministry as walking through the doors opened for me, combined with an understanding of my gifts and going through the years of equipping and training, much more than responding to a burning bush or a dramatic “road to Damascus” vision. I don’t want to say that it doesn’t or couldn’t happen, but simply that when you’re contemplating your call to ministry or to how God wants to use you, don’t wait for the big moment, for the huge sign like the burning bush or a wet fleece. God can work through much smaller, more subtle means.

Now that God and Moses have settled into their meeting,

2) God Reveals His Plan (vv. 7-12)

⁷ Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a

land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” ¹² He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Verses 7-9 here really expand on verses 23-25 from the last chapter. God says that He has both seen and heard His people – seen their affliction and oppression, heard their cries, and He knows their sufferings. And He has come to deliver them and bring them to a wonderful land, the land flowing with milk and honey, which is shorthand for a very prosperous, fruitful land. This land had been promised 500 some years earlier to Moses’ ancestor, Abraham. Genesis 15:18-21 says, “*On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.’*”

And maybe at this point Moses is thinking, “Fantastic, those people need to be freed. Egyptian slavery is awful. I’ll be excited to hear how it goes. Thanks for letting me know, Lord.” But when God says, “*I have come down to deliver them,*” He is going to use a person to accomplish that. There is going to be a specific human deliverer that will be sent. And guess what, Moses, it’s you! That’s right, God could have sent an angel, He could have sent an army, but He sent a shepherd with a staff. He does end up sending an angel and plagues and a bunch of help, but it all starts with God calling Moses to initiate things, to respond in obedience.

Moses has said, “*Here I am*” in verse 4, but you’ll notice his attitude is not “Here I am, send me” like Isaiah. It’s more like “Here I am, and here I’m planning to stay.” So his follow-up questions seem a lot more like objections than honest questions. His first objection is just “*Who am I that I should go?*” There’s the feeling that Moses has been away from Egypt for a long time. 40 years probably feels like another lifetime. Who’s going to remember him? How is he the best-qualified person for this mission? The last time he was in Egypt, he had killed a man and had to flee for his life. He’s 80 years old, isn’t there a younger person willing to take on the slave system?

Now “*Who am I?*” is actually not a bad perspective when spoken in humility. We should all naturally be a bit awed by the tasks that God puts in front of us. There are things that we cannot do in our own power – we cannot change people’s heart, we cannot bring the kingdom of God to bear, we cannot love people unconditionally on our own. But God’s answer to Moses, and His answer to all of us that He calls to attempt things for Him is: “*I will be with you.*” He doesn’t try to convince Moses that he is good enough; that he has a list of accomplishments that qualify him. He doesn’t try to pump up his ego, “Oh no, you’re a great guy with a commanding presence and the right mix of wisdom and diplomacy.” He simply says, “*I will be with you.*” Without God’s presence and help, we can’t accomplish anything spiritually. With His presence and help, there is nothing that we can’t accomplish if He wills it. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*”²

² Anthony T. Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel According to Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), pp. 33-34.

Did you notice something about the sign that God gives in verse 12? It's that the people will worship on this very mountain. But that's not going to happen until they've been freed from Egypt and made their way safely afterwards. It's not a sign that is going to happen on the way, proving that Moses is on the right path. No, Moses is going to have to go in faith, this sign will be confirmation afterwards, a reward for His obedience.

Moses' last question was "Who am I?" and now it's "Who are you?"

3) God Reveals His Name (vv. 13-15)

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The Lord, 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 thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

Moses understands that he is talking to the God of His people, but he needs more than that. It's important that the people understand that Moses is not bringing a new deity; this is the same God whom their people have always worshipped, but they are going to be getting a greater revelation of who He is and what He is like. The Hebrew word for God that is used from the very beginning in Genesis 1:1 for the mighty Creator God, as well as in verse 13 and elsewhere is "Elohim." And now, God gives him a new name: Yahweh.

Have you ever sat behind a car in traffic that has a license plate that has a message with words but is clearly missing letters? I always have fun trying to fill in the different combinations of what it could mean. So if I see a plate that just has the letters "DTHSTR," I like to joke that he's probably a bartender or a barista because he DoTH STiR. And my kids say, "Dad, it's DeaTH STaR!" The Hebrew language is a little bit like that, since there are no vowels. There are rules and scholars have reasons to supply the vowels that they do, but it certainly made it harder in my Hebrew class in seminary when all we had was consonants.

The Hebrew letters that form the name, "the LORD," are roughly the English letters YHWH, what we have commonly pronounced as Yahweh. Some people have called this name Jehovah, though from what I can understand from the most sound Biblical scholarship, the name Yahweh is more accurate; Jehovah is a mistranslation, using the wrong vowels. Our English Bibles generally use LORD to indicate Yahweh.

Yahweh's meaning is linked with the first thing that God had said to Moses: "I am who I am." I don't want to get real technical in explaining the Hebrew nuances, this could also be translated as: "I will be who I will be." What it is implying is that God is always in the present tense; He has always existed and always will exist presently. It could be understood as "I was, I am, and I shall always continue to be." God is telling us what the burning bush has already shown us – that He is eternally existent and eternally present. "I am the One who is." But how appropriate that is for God because He is limitless. We have to add something to the phrase I am, right? I am awake, I am alive, I am thrilled, I am an employee of my company, I am a citizen of my country, etc. Something to complete, something to clarify. We are what we have been born into, the things that have shaped or defined us. God doesn't have to do that, He just is. There is also a sense where this means "He who causes to be." Nobody causes anything to happen to God, but God causes all things to happen. God is independent, and everything owes its existence to Him. There are two really fancy theological

terms bound up here: Aseity – the idea that God doesn't need anything outside of Himself; and Immutability – that God does not change.

The last verse, verse 15, says that this is God's name to be remembered forever. But someone else uses that name. Many hundreds of years later a man would walk the earth and claim this name, this idea of being "I Am." In John 8:58, Jesus told the crowd, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*" And the crowd that was gathered picked up rocks to stone Him because they knew He was claiming that He was divine, that He was equal with God. When Jesus was on trial in Mark 14:61-62: "*... Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'*" He said:

I am the bread of life. (John 6:35)

I am the light of the world. (John 8:12)

I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11)

I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25)

I am the true vine. (John 15:1)

I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

I Am! Jesus was and is fully God, one with the Father, the great I Am, part of the eternal Trinity that has always existed and will always exist.

Conclusion: Your Two Callings

This passage is the beginning of Moses' calling, it will be continued in the weeks ahead as they continue their dialogue at the burning bush. As we think through this passage and how to apply it to our lives, we see that we have 2 senses of calls on our lives:

1) **The Call To Salvation** - God calls each one of us to faith in Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:9 says that God calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light. He calls us from our former life of being spiritually dead, with a record of sin that has earned us a sentence of death and hell to a new life in Jesus where we inherit the kingdom and our sins are not held against us. Jesus is the great Deliverer and Savior of His people. God sent Him and worked through His perfect life and His death on the cross to redeem His people from their sins. Now we can approach God in His holiness because Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins. We should still take off our sandals, spiritually speaking, which means we come in reverence and in awe of His holy presence.

2) **The Call To Ministry Tasks** - The God who saves is also the God who sends. Every Christian is called to deliver the news to those still in darkness, to participate in God's setting the captives free. I don't care if you're blue-collar, white-collar, work with your hands, work on computers, work out of the home or inside of the home; I don't care if you dropped out of high school or have a PhD. God calls you to participate as His hands and feet in the world. Very few of us feel equipped and up to the task; most of us ask, "Why me? Who am I to evangelize to people and speak out about God's truth?" And God says, "It doesn't really matter who you are as much as it matters who I Am." Just as God told Moses "*I will be with you,*" so Jesus promised "*I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). We will always have God with us as we do the tasks that He's called us to. Apart from Him we can do nothing, but we can "*do all thing through Him who strengthens*" us (Philippians 4:13).

Amen.