

The Signs Of The Lord
Exodus 3:16-4:9
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Introduction: When I'm 80

When I'm 80 years old I would like to sit around in a recliner, drink a lot of coffee, eat a lot of chocolate, and sit and bounce my great-grandkids on my knee. I'd like to eat breakfast at greasy spoon diners with old guys like me and talk sports and what the world was like "back then" and how these younger generations have it so easy. I want to go on long walks on weekdays. I want to sit and listen to fingerstyle guitar music. I want to stay up late watching old movies and then sleep thru my doctor's appointments the next morning. I want to listen to young guys preach and watch them use all that energy that I had at their age to run the church; and I'll laugh when they mess up because I'll remember when I made all those same mistakes. My wife tells me I'll be helping her garden in our retirement (I'll believe that when I see it). And hopefully I'll still be able to play golf, and maybe I won't even care about my score so I might actually enjoy it.

How do you see yourself in your later years? Maybe you have similar ideas to me. But imagine if God comes to you and asks you to go on a trip. Well, more like a mission trip. Actually, a "search and rescue mission" trip. You'll have to leave your comfortable life and go take a bunch of people out into the wilderness. At first, they'll be excited that you're helping them, but later they'll turn on you and whine and make threats no matter how well you take care of them. And this is going to take the rest of your life, which will be forty long years. There will be infighting and fighting off outside groups, and at the end of it all, you'll die before you get them into the awesome new land you're taking them. I don't know about you, but if that was me: No thanks, give me my recliner back and send somebody else!

But this is the situation that Moses found himself in when he was 80 years old. If you haven't been around recently for the Exodus series, this passage that we're about to read is in the middle of a longer passage, you could call it the "Burning Bush Dialogue" where God is calling Moses to leave his home with the Midianites and go back to Egypt where he had grown up. The Lord is bringing the suffering of the Hebrews in their slavery to an end, and He has decided that Moses will be the man to make that happen. And of course, Moses has already balked and said, "Uh, why me?" And God just says, "Trust me, I'll be with you and I'm powerful enough to make this happen." But as we'll see, Moses still has reservations.

In the first 7 verses of our passage, God spells out what's going to happen over the next 9 chapters of Exodus. He doesn't tell Moses all the details, but He does give him...

I. Direction (3:16-22)

16 Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, 17 and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey."' 18 And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' 19 But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let

you go. **21** And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, **22** but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

God sent Moses first to the elders of the Israelites. This is the first time elders are mentioned in the Bible; at some point apparently they had developed a system of oversight so that each family or tribe would have a representative or spokesman. And Moses could win over all the people by winning over the elders.

- He will remind them of their past: God was the God of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- He will remind them of their present: God has seen your afflictions and is working to deliver you.
- He will remind them of their future: you are headed for a rich new land.

So after winning over the elders, Moses is then supposed to ask Pharaoh for a 3 day journey into the wilderness to worship and sacrifice. This sounds like a flat out lie designed to give the Hebrews a head start in making a break for freedom. But it seems more likely that God and Moses are giving Pharaoh an easy first step rather than starting with the huge request of letting the people leave for good. After the fourth plague of flies, which we’ll read about in Exodus 8, Pharaoh does give permission for the people to go on this journey to sacrifice, but as soon as God stops the flies, Pharaoh changes his mind and does not let the people go. Pharaoh needs a lot of convincing, and God is prepared to do whatever it takes to convince him; the 10 plagues are neatly summarized in verse 20 as, “I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.” God strikes Pharaoh and Egypt in the same way that they have been striking the Hebrew slaves. Ligon Duncan said, “There are many ancient Egyptian texts that speak about Pharaoh’s strong arm against his enemies. So in a tongue and cheek way, the God of Israel, by His strong arm, is going to strong arm Pharaoh who thinks he has a strong arm into releasing the children of Israel.”¹

And finally, God gives the initial instructions for the “plundering of Egypt.” Somehow the Egyptian people would look upon the Hebrews with favor, either out of pity or in some sense that the Hebrews were owed greatly for their many years of forced labor. What a beautiful provision from the Lord – giving the people their freedom was a great thing, but the Israelites needed clothing in the desert, and their enemies provide it for them. What about the jewelry? What are they going to need silver and gold in the desert for? Well, we’ll see that it would eventually be used to build the tabernacle, but also in a sinful twist, the people would also use it to build the golden calf.²

So God reveals to Moses exactly how the future’s going to unfold, all the way to their being released and given wealth, but it’s almost like Moses hasn’t heard the whole thing. He’s stuck back near the beginning with

II. An Objection (4:1)

4:1 Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’”

It’s a given that Pharaoh won’t listen to Moses and won’t believe in his God. It’s the Hebrews whose unbelief Moses is really worried about. “Lord, what do I do if they flat-out don’t believe me?” This was probably a legitimate concern for Moses, and yet it also feels like a smokescreen, one more

¹ Ligon Duncan’s sermon “I Am Who I Am” from November 26, 2000, found at www.fpcjackson.org.

² James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 47.

weak excuse for him not to have to obey and go. God has already told him, “the elders will listen to you.” This is the 3rd of 5 excuses or objections that Moses brings up during this whole conversation with God. The first two were: “Who I am?” and “Who are you?” The next one will be “I’m not so good at the talking stuff” and when none of those work, Moses just bluntly pleads “*please send someone else.*” (4:13).

What are your excuses when you know God wants you to do something? “Me, Lord, really? I don’t have the time, I don’t have the training. I’m sure there’s someone else who would be so much better.” Few of us have the Lord show up in a burning bush while we’re going about our daily chores and tell us exactly what He wants us to do. But what about when you’re reading through your Bible and you come upon things like, “*forgive as the Lord has forgiven you*” (Colossians 3:13) or “*if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*” (Matthew 5:39)? “Lord, you need me to be forgiving and gentle and respectful of people who hurt me? I’m not so good at that, I don’t appreciate people walking all over me, so maybe those are instructions for someone else.” And yet those commands are actually a lot easier than the “*go and make disciples*” ones.

Or maybe you sense the Lord putting someone in your life to speak the Gospel to and you hesitate with all kinds of excuses why it’s not the right time, they won’t really listen to you, you wouldn’t probably say the right things anyway. Happens to me every time I sit next to someone on a plane – I get this internal dialogue: “I’d talk to this person but then I’d have to stop reading this book. And they probably don’t want to talk to a pastor anyways.” We’re all like Moses, ready to pass the buck and argue with the Lord why we’re not the right person for the job. But more often than not, the Lord is calling us to action, to step out in faith, to speak His truth, and show His love. The whole time, God reminds us, “I’m with you. You’re going in my power not your own. You may fail, you may succeed, but either way I’m looking for your obedience that is a reflection of how much you trust Me and how big You think I am.”

So Moses has this objection, this question, and God doesn’t lose His patience, He simply gives Him

III. Proof (4:2-9)

2 The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” 3 And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. 4 But the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— 5 “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” 6 Again, the Lord said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. 7 Then God said, “Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. 8 “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. 9 If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

My favorite detail is that Moses is scared of the snake and runs away from it, because I definitely would too. It reminds the reader that Moses wasn’t a magician, that he had never seen this happen before, and he was a little freaked out. Now the text doesn’t spell all this out, but it seems that these signs communicate powerful things and symbolize Egypt’s lack of power before the Lord:³

³ F.B. Meyer, *Moses: The Journey of Faith* (Chattanooga: AMG, 2001), p 32.

-Snakes were revered symbols in ancient Egypt. Pharaoh's headdress had a serpent on it, symbolizing both protection from the gods and his power over his people. So the fact that the staff becomes a serpent that Moses runs from – we see a picture of his initial fear of Egypt. But with God's power, Moses will be able to overcome Egypt's power.

-The leprous hand could symbolize that Moses is a polluted, imperfect vessel to be used by God (as we all are), but that God could purify and cleanse him and use him anyways. Or it could even foreshadow the plagues that God will send on Egypt, polluting the land and bringing disease and pain. And leprosy in Scripture can be a punishment for arrogance before God (ask Miriam, Moses' sister later in Exodus or Uzziah the King in 2 Chronicles 26).

-And of course, the Nile river was the source of life and water for the Egyptian people. If the water turns to blood, then all the fish die and the people cannot get water, all of which would make Egyptians leave for other lands if the plague stayed. With the simple act of tainting the water supply, God could completely bring Egypt to its knees.

Do these signs work? We'll find out that they work as all signs from the Lord work: God's people believe them and God's enemies deny them.

Exodus 4:29-31 says, *"Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to 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 people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped."*

So the signs convince the elders and the Hebrew people, but not Pharaoh and his court. When Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh in Exodus 7, they cast the staff down and it becomes a serpent; Pharaoh's magicians are able to do that as well. When Pharaoh does not listen, the plagues start and the first one is the Nile turned to blood; but he's unconvinced.

Now Jesus had the same sort of problem that Moses had when He was ministering on earth: people had a hard time believing that He was really sent from God. So He healed people a lot, and He walked on water, and turned water into wine, and raised people from the dead – all were signs that proved that He had been sent by God and that He truly was God in the flesh. Jesus used signs in His ministry to confirm His word, to authenticate His role as Messiah, and to teach people about the nature and power of God. In fact, He said in John 4:48: *"Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."* And in John 10:37-38: *"If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."*

In Matthew chapter 11, we read about an interesting encounter that Jesus had: *"Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"* And Jesus answered them, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."* (Matthew 11:2-5) Even John, Jesus' cousin who had baptized Him and preached about Him, doubted and needed to know: are you really the Christ sent from God? And Jesus replies essentially, "Look at the signs. I heal, I restore life, I preach the good news. That should tell you everything you need to know."

The ultimate sign that Jesus was who He said He was, of course, is the empty tomb. Death itself could not defeat the Son of God, and it validated everything He said about being God and predicting that He would rise from the dead.

I'm not sure that Moses' 3 signs were meant to signify specific thing about Jesus, but here's what I connect between the 2 stories:

- The serpent reminds us of the prophecy in Genesis 3:15 where the seed of the woman will crush the serpent;
- The leprosy should bring to our mind all the times when Jesus healed lepers in the Gospel; symbolic of all the healing and cleansing that He performed in His earthly ministry.
- Changing water into blood should remind us when Jesus turned water into wine, and the fact that wine in communion represents the blood of Christ. The cleansing blood that covers our sin.

So how is that significant? Jesus triumphs over the serpent, Satan, and all evil spiritual forces, He triumphs over the physical world and the corruption of the fall, and He triumphs over sin with His blood. Jesus defeats the world, the flesh, and the devil for us.

What about you? What are the signs in your life that you are loved and called by God? How do people know that you are one of His? You probably won't be given the ability to do fancy tricks like the staff to serpent one. But Christians do have signs in their lives:

-"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:22-24)

-"By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:10)

-"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves... So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone says, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (James 1:22, 2:17-18)

-"By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

The fruits of the Spirit, obedience, faithful actions, and love. Those are the signs, the proof that we belong to Jesus. You won't do any of those things perfectly, and we're all still sinners, even if we are redeemed sinners. But when you show those things to God's people and to the world, you will be showing that you have been saved, justified, and sanctified by our great God. Amen.