



NEGOTIATING WITH THE HOLY

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Exodus 3:11-4:17
Seventh Message
Brian Morgan
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I like to watch spy movies, especially when the stories combine international intrigue with the more human side of the leading character. Sometimes the story centers on a former CIA agent who has just hung up his spurs and is ready for a well deserved retirement with his family. Then comes that dreaded phone call from Langley, Virginia, the headquarters of the CIA, with the news of an imminent, serious threat. The tension mounts and questions fill the air as we are transported to the negotiating table. How serious is the threat? Will the head of the CIA be able to enlist the battle-worn warrior for one last mission? Will the agent be able to resist the temptation to return to the war zone? How free is he to voice his objections when the person on the other side of the table represents the U.S. Government? Is anyone else qualified for the task? In the end, we wonder whether the agent really had any choice in the matter.

In our text from Exodus, we are invited to a similar table of negotiation, but this time the stakes are higher and the odds of success are slim at best. The agent is Moses, now retired for some forty years. His business career in international relations started promisingly, but shortly after graduate school it took a dark turn and he was forced to abandon his quest and flee to another country. He gave up all his aspirations of being a deliverer for his people and settled down in Midian. There he took up the lowly occupation of sheep herding, a task loathed by the Egyptians. For forty years he has wandered the deserts of Midian, leaving his painful past behind. Then one day the phone rings. God is on the line. He offers Moses a unique new venture, a "start-up" nation, so to speak, with Moses as its founder. There is only one problem: his little company was currently owned by Egypt, the world's largest and most powerful corporation.

Scholars have labeled what follows as the call of Moses, Israel's first prophet. This will give shape to the call of Israel's future prophets, and it has ramifications that are relevant to our "calling" as Christians. We pick up the text after God has appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commissioned him to go to Pharaoh to deliver the sons of Israel from Egypt. The most intriguing thing about this section is the lengthy negotiations between God and Moses. These reveal not just Moses' reluctance (he raises five objections), but God's vulnerability.

I. Moses' First Objection: Identity (3:11-12)

A. Moses' Objection: "Who am I?" (3:11)

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11 NASB)

In Moses' response we see the impact which his flight from Egypt and exile in the wilderness have had on him. No longer is he the man we saw in his prime: confident,

self-assured, and needing no invitation to mediate "justice" for the oppressed. Forty years later his response to God is that he is unfit for the task. He even questions his own identity. Haunted over so many years by painful memories of his failure, Moses no longer desires leadership.

B. God's Answer: "I am with you" (3:12)

And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (3:12)

To Moses' question, "Who am I?" God says it really doesn't matter who he is. What matters is, Who is God? God will be with him and see to it that the task is completed successfully and all obstacles are overcome. Unconvinced, Moses voices a second objection.

II. Moses' Second Objection: Authority (3:13-22)

A. Moses' Objection: Who are you? (3:13)

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" (3:13)

Still plagued by the rejection of his countrymen, Moses foresees that they will question his authority, thus he requests God to grant him an intimate connection to God's name.

B. God's Answer: The Revelation of the Divine Name (3:14-15)

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (3:14)

Recall that this is not a philosophical statement about God's existence or eternal nature, but a dynamic statement about the God who makes himself known in history by faithfully fulfilling his promises to his people. The name leaves Moses in the dark as to who God is, but its ambiguity invites him to have faith that as history unfolds, the name will take on greater and greater significance as God is about to do a new thing.

C. The Renewed Call with Realistic Expectations (3:16-22)

Now that Moses is armed with the intimate knowledge of the divine name, God repeats the command to go to Egypt and gather the elders of Israel and share with them his concerns and plans for them. He assures Moses that when they hear how concerned God is about their suffering, they will believe him. Moses' encounter with Pharaoh will be much more difficult, however. It will take God's strong hand to break Pharaoh's resistance. But in the end,

God will prevail to such an extent that the Egyptians will lavish their wealth upon the Israelites prior to their departure. The slaves will indeed become the plunderers, and with those riches, Israel will build the tabernacle. God carefully prepares Moses with realistic expectations. Though the road to liberation will be long and arduous, and will seem impossible at times, Moses can be assured of success.

Still convinced, Moses raises another objection.

III. Third Objection: Credibility (4:1-9)

A. Moses' Fear: Lack of Credibility

Then Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" (4:1)

Knowing that he is going back to Egypt lacking credibility, Moses questions God's word. Getting Israel to trust Moses may be more difficult than God suggests, and Moses has no fear in saying so. How can he prove that the Lord had actually appeared to him? This will be an issue for all of Israel's later prophets (Deut 13:1-5; 18:14-22). God does not rebuke Moses for his bold challenge or lack of faith. Instead he takes Moses' objection seriously, and responds with three signs. The content of these signs would be significant to the world forces which Moses was asked to confront. They would reveal how God becomes "incarnate" in ways that are relevant to the culture. They would also serve to bolster Moses' faith in his authority as much as Israel's, and will prepare him for the signs he will do in Egypt.

B. God's answer: Three signs to give credibility (4:2-9)

Sign #1: The authority of the staff over the serpent

The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail"—so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—"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." (4:2-5)

The first sign introduces the symbol of Moses' authority, his shepherd's staff. When he throws the staff on the ground it becomes a snake, which sends Moses fleeing. The snake, a key symbol of Pharaoh's authority, is found in many ancient Egyptian artifacts, from Pharaoh's head-dress and clothing to his furniture. *Wadjet* was the snake goddess of Lower Egypt. As Pharaoh's protector, she is depicted as a rearing cobra ready to strike and kill all enemies of Pharaoh. This sign signifies to Moses that God is about to enter Pharaoh's world to confront these forces of evil.

Moses is commanded by God to seize control of the snake by doing the illogical thing, grabbing it by the tail. (The verb "caught," Heb. *chazaq*, is the same term the narrator will use for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.) When Moses obeys, the serpent becomes a staff again. The sign suggests that Moses will defeat the evil powers behind Pharaoh's throne as a shepherd (symbolized by the staff), much as David later would defeat Goliath. The theme has

continued relevance for how we confront world forces of darkness (Eph 6:10-20). We don't fight the world on its terms, but with the tools of a shepherd. Our staff is God's Word that is divinely powerful to pull down strongholds of evil.

To further bolster Moses' faith, God gives him a second sign.

Sign #2: The authority to inflict disease and heal

The LORD furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom." So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprosy like snow. Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. "If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign." (4:6-8)

This second sign is again an ominous threat of the power of God to both inflict and heal disease. Scholars are not certain whether the disease is our modern equivalent of leprosy, but it is clear that skin disease was included as one the plagues (9:8-11). The sign may suggest that Israel had become contaminated during her stay in idolatrous Egypt. After Moses "brings them out" (Hebrew: *yatza'* is the same verb for bringing his hand out from his bosom), they will indeed need divine healing. This was certainly the case when Miriam challenged Moses' leadership and was plagued by leprosy until Moses interceded for her and healed her (Num 12:10). Others suggest that the sign may be a mirror to Moses of his own "death and resurrection" experience in renouncing his own power to become Israel's founding leader. In any case, this life and death sign is to demonstrate clearly that Moses is God's messenger, for the Creator God is the only who has the power to heal life-threatening disease. In case these two signs fail to convince, God graciously adds a third.

Sign #3: The authority to put to death and bring to life

"But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground." (4:9)

Moses is given a third sign that is a preview of the first plague and Israel's final victory over the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. He is to take water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. In the process the life-giving water will be turned into blood. The Nile and its gods were hailed as the life source and fertility of all of Egypt. An ancient hymn (ca. 2100 BCE) reads:

Hail to thee O Nile!
Thou showest thyself in this land,
Coming in peace, giving life to Egypt:
O Ammon, (thou) ledest night into day,
A leading that rejoices the heart!
Overflowing the gardens created by Ra.
Giving life to all animals;
Watering the land without ceasing:
The way of heaven descending:
Lover of food, bestower of corn,
Giving light to every home, O Ptah!¹

Through Moses, God will strike right at the heart of

Egypt's idolatry. Her life source will be turned into death, while the "dry ground" will become Israel's passageway to safety and freedom (14:21). The birth of God's people will take place through the destruction of Egypt's idolatrous world.

We can hear the theology of these signs loud and clear in Moses' final sermon in Deuteronomy:

"See now that I, I am He,
And there is no god besides Me;
It is I who put to death and give life. (third sign)
I have wounded and it is I who heal, (second sign)
And there is no one who can deliver from My hand."
(first sign) (Deut 32:39)

In this divine dialogue, God takes Moses' doubts seriously and methodically answers each of his three negative fears ("They will *not believe* me, *nor hearken* unto my voice: for they will say, "The Lord has *not appeared* to you," 4:1) with three signs designed to evoke belief (vv. 5, 8, 9). Now that he is equipped with a new identity, unrivaled authority and credibility, we would expect Moses to march off on his mission. But he remains unmoved, and politely demurs with yet another excuse.

IV. Fourth Objection: Inadequacy (4:10-12)

A. Moses' Objection: Inept in Speech

Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (4:10)

In a very polite and diplomatic tone, Moses lists a fourth objection. He is willing to be God's servant, but there is just one problem: he is not eloquent. Perhaps "if had he been more eloquent, he would have been able to convince God that he was not the man for the task!"² Literally, he claims he is "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." He is saying that these organs don't function properly, which may suggest that he had a speech impediment. Though he may be able to do works of wonder, if he can't speak, what good is he as God's messenger? There may also be an implied criticism, as Houtman observes, that even in his contact with God, he hasn't improved, "therefore, if you send me, the undertaking is bound to be a failure."³

B. God's Answer: No Handicap is an Obstacle to God

The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say." (4:11-12)

God's answer is that as the Creator, he takes full responsibility for every physical handicap. Instead of seeing them as a detriment to the task, God will work through them to show more of his glory (John 9:3). So rather than removing Moses' speech impediment, he will be with Moses in the midst of it, teaching him exactly what to say. In this manner, through one who stammers and stutters, God will shame the sages of Egypt.

The apostle Paul described himself as beset with a similar weakness. There were those who were put off by his lack of eloquence, describing him as a man whose "letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor 10:10). But

rather than seeing this as a handicap, Paul told the Corinthians in his earlier letter, "God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God" (1 Cor 1:27-29).

I have found the same to be true in my own life. After thirty years of ministry, I am a reluctant preacher. As a boy I was extremely shy and nervous in front of large groups. To get over my shyness I enrolled in play-production as an adolescent. But after my debut performance, my drama teacher told me that I was a "mush mouth" and I would never be a public speaker. While I enjoy preaching on Sunday, during the week I find myself severely handicapped by distractions in my preparation. All week long I labor, feeling that I'm merely stammering and stuttering and making little progress. Even when the preparation is done I wonder if God's Spirit will be present to foster belief and awaken dead hearts. To me, preaching is like giving birth: there is joy in the delivery, but who would want the pain of labor? The older I get, the more I find that my inadequacies do not go away. They remain fixed to deepen my trust and dependence on God. We must affirm with Paul, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:5-6).

What are your handicaps? No matter what they may be, they pose no impediment to God.

V. Fifth Objection: Unavailability (4:13-17)

A. Moses' Objection: Send anyone but me (4:13)

But he said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will." (4:13)

With all his objections answered, Moses has no cards left to play. In the most polite and courteous language, he says, in effect, "Send, my Lord, whomever you wish" (left unstated are the words, "as long as it isn't me!") After this lengthy negotiation, Moses' real motive is revealed: he never wanted the job in the first place! His objections were a smokescreen to hide the real issue. God, who had faithfully taken him at face value, had trusted him and been vulnerable with him during the whole negotiation process, is now angry and hurt. "Betrayal" might even be closer to the emotion Moses may have provoked for God's anger to burn. What can God do now with an unwilling servant?

B. God's response: Yes and no! (4:14-17)

Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs." (4:14-17)

In the closing dialogue, God's answer is "Yes" and

“No.” He will send someone else: Aaron, who is not only eloquent but delighted to serve. Unlike Moses, he will pose no objections. On the other hand, Moses cannot escape his calling. Like it or not, he is going to go. The irony is that in turning down the role of messenger, Moses will serve even a higher role—that of “God” to Aaron. He will give the message, while Aaron will articulate it to the people. And that shepherd’s staff will remain in Moses’ hands until the task is done.

After these arduous, lengthy negotiations, we learn that Moses really didn’t have a choice, for, as the Scripture says, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). We should be thankful for the patience and persistence of God’s mercy. Just a few weeks later, when Moses is standing on the shores of the Red Sea and thousands of Israelites have been safely led through on dry ground, imagine how he must felt as he looked back on this moment. How grateful he must have been that God did not give up on him and fully let him have his way.

VI. Called to Serve a Vulnerable God

Let me conclude with three observations about our calling, and one about the God whom we serve. First, like Moses, all Christians are called and gifted. As Peter writes, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has *called* you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Like Moses, we are God’s secret agents deployed into enemy territory with the calling to liberate all from the tyranny of evil. The stakes are huge. Serving in such a battle is not just our duty, it is our supreme privilege. Woe to us if we hide behind enemy lines in comfort and ease when God has already won the decisive battle and guarantees our victory.

Second, the shame of our past, which often hinders our willingness to serve, is no impediment to God’s service. Yet, confidence and eagerness are not requirements for service. Compassion is what is needed. God can accomplish more with a broken servant who has to be tenderly coaxed and prodded into service than he can with an eager yet ar-

rogant volunteer. Consider the ministry of C. S. Lewis. Yet he once described himself as “the most reluctant convert in all of England.” Consider the apostle Peter. How much more effective he became as a shepherd after his denial of Jesus than his earlier bravado in the garden of Gethsemane.

Third, handicaps are no impediment to service; rather, they are doorways to dependence. Our ailments and inadequacies bring more glory to God than our stable strengths which take little effort to engage. The reason is that they force us to pray.

And finally, let me close with an observation about the character of the God we serve. The revelation of God’s holiness did not overpower Moses but instead invited him into genuine conversation, dialogue and even argument. God never shuts us down. He welcomes us to his table of negotiation. Think of all Moses would have missed out on had he failed to negotiate: the divine commitment to the task, the revelation of the divine name, the detailed plan and expectations of the mission, and the divine equipment (the three signs) to deconstruct Egypt. So free is Moses in this encounter we wonder who will prevail in his persistent challenges to God. Here is a man who claims he is slow of speech, yet he holds his own against the almighty God. So free is Moses it will take everything in God’s arsenal to enlist him for his mission—and even then God ends up with plan B instead of plan A! The text portrays God as extremely vulnerable in his encounters with mankind. Even at great pains to his own person he will never coerce us to do his will. Although the “gifts and calling of God are irrevocable,” let us not forget what a large role he grants us to play in the process.

1. http://nefertiti.iwebland.com/texts/hymn_to_the_nile.htm
2. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 71.
3. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 409.

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