

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 4:1-17

To understand more about the signs and wonders God gave to Moses as His mouthpiece.

Read the Text:

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.'" 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." 10 But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." 11 Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." 13 But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." 14 Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. 16 He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. 17 And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs." (Exodus 4:1-17, ESV)

Study the Text:

Signs

Chapter 4 begins where chapter 3 left off, with God's commission of Moses to go to the people of Israel and the king of Egypt and tell them: "I AM has sent me to you" (Ex. 3:14). Additionally, God promises to give "good favor" to the Israelites and to provide for them the riches of the Egyptians (Ex. 3:21-22). It is to this proposition that Moses retorts in the beginning of chapter 4: "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'" (Ex. 4:1). This sets the stage for the direction that the LORD gives to Moses. He promises to accompany Moses with signs (Ex. 4:1-9) and speech (Ex. 4:10-17). Moses was neither powerful nor eloquent in speech, and so God promised to provide for Him the means to communicate not only God's words, but God's power. Below is a breakdown of the specific signs mentioned to Moses.

SERPENT

The first sign involved Moses' staff: "The LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff'" (Ex. 4:2). God then commands Moses to throw the staff onto the ground, and it immediately "became a serpent, and Moses ran from it" (Ex. 4:3). The word for "serpent" is the common word to describe serpents in the Old Testament, however, it is worth noting that serpents were worshipped in Egypt and thus this sign is unique to the Exodus story. This is a sign that never occurs again outside of this context.

The serpents native to the ancient near East were also highly venomous and thus feared, which explains why Moses immediately ran from it. There is a wordplay in the verbs used in verse 4 that is also worth noting. God tells Moses to “catch it by the tail” (‘āḥuz), a move that would make Moses vulnerable to the serpent’s fangs, and instead Moses “caught it” (ḥāzaq), which indicates that he “grabbed it cautiously.” Miraculously, the serpent becomes a staff in his hand. This is a display of power outside of human ability or reason, and it’s purposeful - “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” (Ex. 4:5). This is a sign that would come to fruition eventually in Exodus 7.

LEPROSY

Before Moses can answer God, He demonstrates a second sign, this time over the skin disease known as leprosy. Verses 6 and 7 read: “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. 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.” Interestingly, this is a sign given to Moses here, but never used again after, at least in this format. Leprosy was often thought of as a result of God’s judgment, and at least in the case of Numbers 12, it is. In Numbers 12, God strikes Miriam, Moses’ sister, with leprosy because of her sin (Num. 12:10). Again, the point of this sign is to demonstrate that Yahweh has the power over things that humans do not.

BLOOD

God gives Moses a third sign, this time instructing him to “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” (Ex. 4:9). This, of course, ends up being the first of the ten plagues (Ex. 7:14-24). While the third sign might appear to be less terrifying than a serpent or leprosy, it actually is the gravest warning of the three. While the first two signs would impact several individuals, the third sign threatens all of Egypt, as the Nile is a major resource for them. It is also different in that the first two signs seems to be “performed” by Moses, whereas this one is performed by God. In the first two signs, Moses is the actor (e.g. throwing down the staff, putting his hand inside his cloak), but in the third sign, God is the actor. Moses is simply showing what God has done to the water in the Nile. The first two are akin to “faith signs,” where as the third is more akin to a plague, or more accurately, a “proving act.”

More will be said concerning the usage of the serpents and the blood from the Nile when these signs are used against Egypt. Some of the imagery and wordplay in these passages demonstrates the clear message that Yahweh is over all of the Egyptian gods. In every conceivable manner, God consumes their idols and false gods and proves through power (and ultimately Passover) that He, and He alone is worthy of worship.

Speech

After being shown the signs that will demonstrate God’s power, Moses is still concerned on account of his inability to speak eloquently (Ex. 4:10). This is how Aaron, Moses’ brother, is introduced into the narrative. God first reminds Moses that no speech impediment can thwart God’s plans and purposes, for God is the One who “has made man’s mouth,” and “who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind” (Ex. 4:11). However, even this assurance isn’t enough for Moses, and this lack of trust kindles the anger of the LORD towards him (Ex. 4:12). God then tells him to have Aaron speak on his behalf (Ex. 4:14-16). Interestingly, “the Levite” is included, foreshadowing the important role Aaron will play as the first high priest of the Levitical priests.

Take note that Moses is the prophet, not Aaron, and yet Aaron is the mouthpiece for Moses, as Moses is the mouthpiece for God. This raises two interesting points with regard to prophets. For one, the prophet is not necessarily the one who speaks God's words, but the one to whom God's words are revealed. Aaron is the one speaking, and yet Aaron is never seen as the prophet; Moses is. Moses is the conduit between God and the people, much in the same way the people will eventually serve as a broader conduit to the nations. Israel must believe Moses as Moses must believe Yahweh. As Moses is to be the medium of the message to Israel, Israel is to be the medium of the message to the world (Ex. 19:4-6). Secondly, and more broadly connected to the signs as well, prophets are merely vessels through which God's power and purpose is revealed. The ultimate source of all of it does not rest on the prophet, but God Himself. While Moses holds a special place as the most unique prophet in the Old Testament (Deut. 34:10-12), all of the worship and veneration goes to God, not Moses.

What About Now?

One major takeaway is the reminder of who is the ultimate source behind all good things in the church and in the world: God Himself. It's easy in the modern world to fall victim to a "celebrity pastor" culture wherein much glory is given to men who are excellent communicators and teachers of God's word. We must never succumb to this. God uses people and equips them to do marvelous things, but we are to never confuse the vessel for the source. God must always receive glory; He is the source of "every good and every perfect gift" (Ja. 1:17). Another takeaway is that our own personal fears and shortcomings should never prevent us from walking in God's purpose for our lives. Moses was scared and unable to speak well, and God reminded him that he would have everything he needed to do the work to which he was called. Sometimes our shortcomings feel like roadblocks to God's call on our lives; this is never the case. God is God over all things, including every aspect of who we are and what we can and cannot do on our own. Luckily, God never calls us to do His bidding on our own. He has reminded us: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 4:1-3. What objection does Moses raise with God? What does God ask Moses to do with his staff? What happens when he throws it down?

2. Read Exodus 4:4-5. What does God command Moses to do to the serpent? What happens when he grabs it? What is the significance of God's title He gives to Himself in verse 5?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 4:6-8. What is the second directive given to Moses? What does this prove? How does this sign eventually materialize in the book of Numbers? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Exodus 4:9. What is the third sign given? How does this third sign differ from the first two? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 4:10-13. What is the next objection Moses raises with God? How does God respond to this objection?

2. Read Exodus 4:14. What does Moses' hesitation incite in God? What does God say to Moses in response? Who is introduced in this passage? How is Aaron described?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 4:15. What does God tell Moses to do? What does God promise to both of them?

2. Read Exodus 4:16-17. In your own words, summarize these two verses.

Discuss the Text:

Week 7 Discussion: Fear

Twice in this chapter, Moses' fear about his own shortcomings prevent him from doing what God tells him to do. God gives him the promise of supernatural signs and speech (through his brother, Aaron) to answer those fears. Talk as a group about how fear has prevented you from walking in your purpose, and what steps you need to take in order to overcome that.

1. Icebreaker: What shortcoming has most prevented you from walking in God's purpose for your life?
2. Have you ever seen fear sabotage someone else you love? How so?
3. Would other people describe you as "fearful?"
4. Has God ever "overcome" your fears or shortcomings in the past? If so, how so?
5. Read 2 Tim. 1:6-7. What gift do you need to "fan to flame?"
6. If you have fears that have prevented you from walking in obedience to God's call on your life, would you consider confessing those fears with your class, and then pray for one another?

Takeaways:

1. God gives Moses "signs" to demonstrate God's authority given to him as a prophet.
2. God tells Moses to have Aaron speak on behalf of Moses, while Moses speaks on behalf of God.