

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 6 June 1999

No. T0061

Speaker: Dr. Gordon Hughes

The Bible and Miracles: Moses and the Burning Bush

Many of us can look back over our lives and pick out days that were special to us – red-letter days. The name derives from festivals which used to be marked in red on the calendar. We look back fondly on those happy days which stand out in our lives - the day we left school, the day we passed the driving test, the day we got married, the day our first child was born, the day we retired from work.

Last week, we were thinking about the miracles of the Old Testament. Today, we are going to think about one of the earliest of these - the miracle of the burning bush. You will find the story in Exodus chapter 3. Please take time after this broadcast to read it carefully.

That was surely a red letter day in Moses' life! He had warmed himself many times by fires in those cooler desert evenings. But those fires had had to have fresh kindling added or they had gone out, leaving Moses to shiver in the cooler air. But this was different. Here was a bush that burned and the intensity of the fire never diminished! And then, from out of that bush, God spoke to Moses directly, for the first time in his life. What a day!

We should, first, remind ourselves of the events which led up to that day. It has often been remarked that the life of Moses falls into three 40 year periods. His first 40 years were spent in Pharaoh's palace, being brought up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Here he learned to be somebody. The next 40 years were spent in the land of Midian, learning to be nobody. His last 40 years were spent leading the Israelites from Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land. Here he learned that God was everything! Each of these periods was vital in God's plan for Moses' life, in Moses' spiritual education.

In those first 40 years in Pharaoh's palace, Stephen tells us, "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). The skills which Moses learned there would in later life, as sanctified by God, be used by God to help make Moses the leader he was. But those years in the palace, although comfortable and easy years for Moses, were not easy years for Moses' fellow Israelites. Their lives were made bitter with hard bondage as Pharaoh's slaves (Exodus 1:14).

Eventually, the day came when Moses killed an Egyptian for his cruel treatment of an Israelite. Moses then left Egypt. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that "Moses ... refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:24-26).

From Egypt, Moses came to the land of Midian, where he found shelter in the home of Jethro, the priest of Midian. So for 40 years, Moses helped care for Jethro's flock. How many hours had been spent in solitude with those sheep, caring for them, leading them from pasture to pasture. Perhaps in those moments of quietness, Moses' thoughts had turned to the God who had first moved his parents to defy Pharaoh's order and spare Moses' life. How different life was from all the luxury of the palace! But how vital were the lessons he learned - lessons of carefully providing for those sheep, protecting them, tending them. These lessons would be put to good use as he subsequently led God's human flock, the Israelites, through the wilderness.

It is striking how often in the Bible we read of those whom God used mightily who began life looking after sheep. Joseph, who arose to be prime minister of Egypt (and the saviour of the world, from famine at least, as his Egyptian name, Zaphnath-Paaneah, testifies) began life in this way (Genesis 37:2). David left his sheep with a keeper while he went to visit his brothers in the valley of Elah, and there defeated the giant, Goliath. Subsequently he became one of the best kings of Israel, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Supremely, of course, the Lord Jesus speaks of Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). He is also described as the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20) and as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). Matthew tells us that, as the Lord Jesus looked upon the multitudes, His shepherd heart was "moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:35).

Here, in the deserts of Midian, Moses' heart is being moulded after the heart of God. Perhaps this day had begun like any other day. There would probably have been other days when Moses had brought his flock to the back of this

desert, to Horeb, the mountain of God. But this was Moses red-letter day! The lessons of the previous 80 years were behind him now. The time had come when God would call Moses for this special service of leading His people out of Egypt and through the wilderness. In God's sovereignty, Moses would only be allowed, however, to bring them to the borders of the Promised Land. Another servant, Joshua, would bring them into the Land itself.

So, in Exodus 3:2, we read that the Angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush. We should first of all say something about this very important expression, 'the Angel of the LORD'. This was no ordinary angel! When this same Angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah and his wife to tell them of the forthcoming birth of their special son, Samson, they both knew that they had seen God Himself (Judges 13). The expression, 'the Angel of the LORD', then would generally point to a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus Himself. Such appearances were made to Abraham (Genesis 18) and to Joshua (Joshua 5). No ordinary angel then would suffice for this special service. The Lord Jesus Himself would come to commission him for this great work of leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

At first, Moses is attracted by the peculiarity of the sight - a bush which burned but which was not burned up by the fire. Never had he seen the like of this before. So often, when the Lord Jesus was here, He taught the people in picture language which they might all readily understand. So here, the Lord presents this graphic picture for Moses' instruction and encouragement. However much the Israelites might suffer under Pharaoh, however much they might, as it were, burn in the fire of Egypt, they would not be consumed by their suffering, by that fire. God was with them and had come down to deliver them (verse 8).

Some have tried to explain away the miracle by saying that it was probably only an electric storm, not uncommon in those parts. God may choose to use natural means to accomplish His purpose. But miracle this certainly was! For here, just at the time Moses was passing, the bush burned and God spoke to Moses.

But then (verse 4), God calls to Moses out of the fire, "Moses, Moses". Here we find one of only seven instances in Scripture when God calls individuals personally by name in this double fashion. Generally, this double call indicates extreme urgency. There could seldom have been a more urgent moment than that when Abraham, on the point of slaying his son, is stopped by God, "Abraham, Abraham" (Genesis 22:11). This is the first time the double call is used. How urgent was the moment when the Lord from heaven stopped Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus to persecute the Lord's people, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me" (Acts 9:4). This is the last time when this double call is used.

So God calls urgently to Moses. No longer would He allow His people to suffer under Pharaoh's cruel tyranny. Moses would be sent to Pharaoh with God's demand, "Let My people go". Moses initial response to that call is beautiful: "Here I am". Abraham could respond with just those same words (Genesis 22:1). So too Ananias (Acts 9:10). These were servants instantly available to the Master. There was no unconfessed sin to be put right first. Their hands were not soiled by other business. Their time was not taken up by other distractions. They were, to use the words of Paul to Timothy, "meet for the master's use" (2 Timothy 2:21). If the Lord were to call you, or me, to some service, great or small, for Him today, would you, would I, be instantly available to Him as Moses was?

This bush that burned but was not consumed was a special place. God says to Moses, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (verse 5). God Himself was there! Today, we may not experience God in miraculous experiences like the burning bush, but we can all have the experience of standing, as it were, on holy ground. Read carefully the Gospel record of Jesus' sufferings and His death at Calvary, or read His High Priestly prayer to His Father in John 17, and you will recognise that you are, indeed, on holy ground. Many of you will have had the experience, as I have had, of having such a sense of the presence of the Lord in worshipping together with fellow believers, that you are, indeed, on holy ground.

In verse 6, God reminds Moses that He is not only the God of his father, but also of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. It was to Abraham that God first gave the promise to make of him a great nation (Genesis 12:2). God later went on to promise Abraham that his descendants would be "strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years...afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Genesis 15:13 and 14) That time had now come and God, ever true to His word, calls Moses to be His special instrument of deliverance.

How tenderly God can say of His people, "I know their pain" (verse 7). Here, at the very beginning of the Bible, we see foreshadowed that wonderful truth which would burst into its full light in the New Testament: the sufferings of God's people are His sufferings. Saul of Tarsus, to whom we have already referred, learned this as the Lord had to say to him, "Why are you persecuting Me - not My people, but Me?" (Acts 9:4)

God then outlines to Moses His twofold purpose for His people Israel: "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them ... to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey" (verse 8). God's purpose for His people went far beyond mere relief of their slavery. He would bring them into untold blessing.

So today, through the work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary, God not only delivers us from sin's slavery but brings us into a realm of rich, spiritual blessings in Christ. What a great God He is!

However, when God proposes to send Moses to Pharaoh (verse 10), Moses, full of fear, replies, "Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh?" (verse 11). It is not a bad thing for any of us to have a sense of our unworthiness and inability to do anything for God of ourselves. However, to cling to that inability in the face of God's direct command becomes a matter of simple disobedience. Moses would have to learn, as he did later from his father in law, Jethro, "If...God so commands you, then you will be able" (Exodus 18:23). "Our God whom we serve is able..." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego could confidently say when threatened by King Nebuchadnezzar with the burning, fiery furnace.

However, God deals very tenderly with His fearful servant. "He knows our frame, He remembers that we are dust", the psalmist reminds us (Psalm 103:14). "I will certainly be with you", is His promise to Moses (verse 12). That same promise was left by the Lord Jesus to His eleven disciples as He went back to heaven. He had just given them the awesome task: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". How could they possibly achieve such a task? For their personal encouragement and help, Jesus' final word to them was, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19 and 20).

We today need to lay hold of that same promise of the Lord Jesus. Whatever situations of need face us, whatever dangers threaten us, He has promised to be with us! Hebrews 13:5 and 6 reminds us: "For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you". So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Moses then asks God, "When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" (verse 13). Moses' question is, perhaps, not too surprising. Remember that this is the first time that God had spoken directly to Him. He had yet to learn, as he would in the final 40 years of his life, that God was everything!

So, in verse 14, we read, "And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent Me to you.'" This verse is a profoundly important revelation of God. It is not "I was", as if He no longer existed. Nor "I will be", as though there was a time when He did not exist. This is a statement of His eternal pre-existence. God was, and is, and ever will be. In the power of that name, Moses would go to Pharaoh and bring the people out from captivity. Everything which Moses needed he would find in the One who is the I AM. It is noteworthy that it is this same name of God which the Lord Jesus took for Himself and even more fully revealed. Seven times over in the Gospel of John, He speaks of Himself in these terms:

- I am the bread of life (6:48);
- I am the light of the world (9:5);
- I am the door of the sheep (10:7);
- I am the good shepherd (10:11);
- I am the resurrection and the life (11:25);
- I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6);
- I am the true vine (15:1).

Indeed, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, He challenged them, "Whom are you seeking?" When they answered, "Jesus of Nazareth", He replied, "I am" (John 18:3-6). Such was the power of that name that the soldiers fell to the ground. Jesus could have walked past them but instead, in marvellous grace, submitted to them.

Moses still had other lessons to learn, but God would be with him and help him. Let us ever remember as followers of the Lord Jesus, left here in this world to serve Him, that He is everything we need to follow Him and to serve Him.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.