



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, Senior Pastor
The Lord's Day, August 13, 2017

www.templebaptist.us

© 2017

Moses: God's Reluctant Shepherd
Exodus 3:1 – 4:20

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Moses?

Here he was on the backside of the wilderness tending his father-in-law Jethro's sheep, just as he'd been doing for the past 40 years.

He was already 80 years old. The second half of his life to this point had been very different from the first.

For 40 years he had been a member of the house of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. At the time he was born, the Pharaoh was afraid that the growing population of the Hebrews in Egypt was a threat to national security. So to eliminate the threat, he had ordered the Egyptians to throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile River.

But when Moses was born, somehow his mother hid him for three months, then lovingly set him afloat on the Nile in a papyrus basket coated with tar and pitch to waterproof it. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby when she was at the river with her servants. Though she recognized he was a Hebrew child, she had compassion on him and decided to take him as her own son. So Moses grew up in Pharaoh's court as his grandson.

But when he was about 40 years old, things changed drastically. Knowing that he was a Hebrew by birth, one day Moses decided to go out and watch his own people at work. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and to stop it, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

When he tried to intervene in a dispute between two Hebrews the next day, the one in the wrong asked him, "**Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?**" (Exodus 2:14).¹

Moses knew that somebody knew.

And when Pharaoh knew, he was ready to kill Moses. So Moses fled to the wilderness of Midian, where he met and helped Jethro's daughters and eventually married his daughter Zipporah. For the next 40 years, this privileged Egyptian royal family adoptee was a simple shepherd.

So now, at 80, here he was on the backside of the wilderness tending sheep. But what was about to happen would change his life more than he could ever imagine!

Meeting God in the desert

Moses had led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and had come to Horeb, **the mountain of God** (3:1). Something caught his eye—a bush that was on fire, but wasn't burning up. He decided he was going to investigate it, and went toward the bush.

And then it happened. **God called to him out of the bush . . .** (3:4) by name! "**Moses, Moses!**" And all Moses could do was to say, "**Here I am**" (3:4).

God told him not to come any closer and to take off his sandals because he was on holy

ground. Then God told him, **"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"** (3:5-6). And now Moses really was terrified and hid his face.

What the LORD said next must have astounded him, though. He told Moses that he had seen the misery of his people in Egypt and had heard them crying out because of their taskmasters, and that he was concerned about their suffering and had come down to do something about it! **"I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . ."** (3:7-8).

Then he said, **"So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt"** (3:10).

Reluctance and objections

All this must have been more than Moses could get hold of all at once. After all, 40 years or so earlier, he had *fled* from Egypt! And now God wanted him to *go back* and bring the Israelites out?

We can understand his reluctance, can't we, and probably sympathize—maybe even *empathize* with him.

In his reluctance, Moses raised every objection he could think of. And God responded to every one of them!

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (3:11). God's response was simple and to the point: **"I will be with you"** (3:12). What God was saying was, "Moses, it doesn't matter who you are, because I will be with you. It matters who I am!"

Sort of hard to respond to that, isn't it? God promised his presence, and gave Moses a sign—a sign that would come *after* he had obeyed God.

So Moses took another tack—**"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"** (3:13).

And without hesitation God answered, **"I AM WHO I AM. Thus you shall say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'"** (3:14). Then he added, **"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you' . . ."** (3:15).

Then God told Moses to go assemble the elders of Israel and tell them what God was going to do. He promised that they would listen to Moses, and said they were to go with Moses to tell Pharaoh to let them go into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to him. He also warned Moses that Pharaoh would be stubborn and wouldn't let them go unless he was ***compelled by a mighty hand***. But God would stretch out his hand to strike Egypt, and then Pharaoh would let the Israelites go. The Egyptians would be favorably disposed toward the Israelites, and give them silver, gold, and clothing as they prepared to leave.

But Moses *still* had his objections.

He said, **"But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you?'"** (4:1).

The LORD told Moses to throw his staff ***on the ground***. When he did, ***it became a snake***. He did what we would do—he ***drew back from it***. But then the LORD told him to pick it up by its tail. Here's where Moses began to demonstrate faith. He reached out and picked up the snake by its tail, and it became his staff again. The LORD told him that this was a sign to show the Israelites that he had indeed spoken to him.

Then the LORD told Moses to put his hand inside his cloak. Moses did, and when he took it

out, it was leprous. Then the LORD told him to put it in again, and this time when he took it out, it was fully restored.

The LORD told Moses to show this sign if they didn't believe the first one. Then if they still had their doubts, he was to take water from the Nile River, and when he poured it out on the ground, it would become blood.

Moses had one more objection: ***"O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue"*** (4:10). The LORD responded by reminding him that he is the one who gave humans the ability to speak, and promised to help him.

Finally in desperation, Moses pleads, ***"O my Lord, please send someone else"*** (4:13). And at this point, the LORD became angry. He told Moses that he knew his brother Aaron could speak, so he would send him with him as his spokesman.

And so at last, Moses took his staff that, as the text describes it in 4:20, was now ***"the staff of God"*** in his hand, got his family together, and left for Egypt to do what God had called him to do.

What about us?

Moses was reluctant to obey God's call, but God answered every one of his objections.

But do we react much better? Don't we come up with our own objections and excuses and loopholes to try to get out of obeying God's call on our lives?

Now the first and primary call is *the call to discipleship*, to follow Jesus as our Lord. That's the call for every person, and since he gave his life for us on the cross and rose from the dead, he certainly has the right to make that demand. Once we respond to that call, then within that call *God calls us to specific areas of service* in his kingdom. For Moses, it was to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

For me, it's the call to be a pastor, focusing on preaching and teaching God's word. For you it may be teaching, serving, giving, missions, evangelism, helping, doing acts of mercy, or a host of other ways of serving Christ—but we all have a calling in Christ. The question is, *What is it and how are we responding to it?*

Are you reluctant to be who God is calling you to be and to do what he's calling you to do? Moses' story can help us here. As we reflect on it, several things challenge and encourage us to obey God's call on our lives.

For instance, Moses' story reminds us that *God usually accomplishes his purposes through human servants*. He has *the power* to do things directly, but he usually involves human instruments in some way. God came down to rescue his people, but he sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt, promising him his presence and power. Look how God used the Twelve Apostles, the Apostle Paul, and a multitude of others in the New Testament. Even God the Son took on humanity in order to accomplish his redemptive purpose!

This story reminds us how *God uses circumstances and experiences to prepare us for service*. Moses was in Pharaoh's court for 40 years, so he knew that side of things. He was in the wilderness as a shepherd for 40 years, so he knew how to lead and provide, and knew the wilderness well. When I look back over my ministry, I can see how God used each church I served and each step in my education to prepare me for later assignments.

One of the real twists in this story is how God confirmed his call to Moses. It was *after* his

obedience—

“and this shall be the sign for you, that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (3:12)

In other words, *confirmation usually follows commitment*. That’s certainly been true in my experience! God wants us to follow by faith, to obey him because we trust him. But then he graciously gives us confirmation *after the fact* to deepen that faith and trust.

And yet we’re often still reluctant. But *no matter how reluctant we may be, when God us calls us to a task, no objection or excuse is sufficient*. When God called Jeremiah to be his prophet, he protested that he was too young. When he called Ananias to go to Saul of Tarsus after his conversion to restore his sight, Ananias objected, ***“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem”*** (Acts 9:13). But the Lord insisted and Ananias went. So if you’re reluctant and protest, you’re in good company. But no objection or excuse is sufficient. If you refuse to obey, your *reluctance* has turned to *rebellion*.

Indeed, no excuse or objection is sufficient, but *God’s presence and power are always sufficient*. No matter how unlikely or impossible the task may seem to us, if God is calling us, he’ll enable us to accomplish whatever he’s calling us to do, just as he did with Moses and Gideon and David and a host of others!

And so . . .

And so what is God calling you to do?

Is he calling you to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord?

Is he calling you to focus on serving him in your daily walk and work?

Is he calling you to serve in some particular role in our church’s ministry and mission?

Is he calling you to some kind of vocational ministry—preaching or teaching or music or some other kind of ministry?

Is he calling you to missions—to missional involvement here in our community or to volunteer missions or to career service as a missionary?

You can raise all the objections and give all the excuses you can think of. But there’s only one acceptable response—*faithful obedience*. And you can do that! Because *when God calls us to a task, his presence and power enable us to accomplish it. Always*.

Amen.

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.