

SURPRISES & CHALLENGES

Scripture: Exodus 2:23-4:20

Imagine yourself as an eighty-year-old shepherd taking care of your sheep in a parched and lonely land.

Forty years before you have been filled with enthusiasm and great plans for God. But things have not turned out as you thought they would.

Ambition is gone; hope is dead.

You are reconciled to the fact that this is all there is; this is all there will be.

One day you are with your sheep, thinking about nothing in particular, when something gets your attention.

Off in the distance a bush is burning—the dry, thorny shrub of that area.

Usually that type of bush would burn in a sudden flare, being quickly reduced to a pile of grey ash.

Instead it continues to burn with a steady flame.

You decide to go closer to possibly discover the cause of this phenomenon.

As you approach the bush the real surprise comes.

A great Voice speaks from the flame, speaking your name: “Moses, Moses.”

You stop in your tracks and manage to stammer, “I am here.”

The Voice continues: “Do not come any closer.

Take off your sandals, for this is holy ground.

I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.”

Now let us shift from that scene to another one: not a dusty desert with rocks and sheep, but in a comfortable auditorium with fellow Christians.

Most of us are not in shepherd’s gear but in our Sunday best.

There is no burning bush.

Some of us stayed up a little late last night, and we are trying to stay awake so we will not be embarrassed.

Some of us are here because we are supposed to be here; we are not really expecting anything to happen.

For some it is just another Sunday.

Let us discover the big surprises that God showed to Moses.

SURPRISE NUMBER ONE:

GOD HAD A CHALLENGE FOR MOSES—A GLORIOUS CHALLENGE

Moses was old and discouraged.

But God still had a glorious purpose for his life!

You will remember that the children of Israel had gone into Egypt during the famine.

There they had grown into a large nation.

This nation within a nation had made Pharaoh nervous, and he had made them slaves. (Exodus 2:23-25)

Notice: “And God *heard* . . . and God *remembered*. . . And God *saw* . . . and God *took notice*.”

God is *moved* by their cries.

In chapter 3 God comes to Moses.

Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt (3:10).

Can we not find a parallel to ourselves in this story?

God created man.

But man departed from God through sin.

He remembered His promise to send a Savior (Genesis 3 and 12).

Now God comes to *us* just as surely as He came to Moses in the burning bush long ago.

He says to us through His Word:

The whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)

Men are enslaved in sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:16).

They are lost and without hope (Ephesians 2:12).

And God said:

“Go. . . .” (Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15-16).

*With Moses it was the opportunity to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery.
With us it is the privilege of leading men out of the slavery of sin.*

SURPRISE NUMBER TWO:

GOD MADE SURE MOSES HAD ALL HE NEEDED TO MEET THAT CHALLENGE

To understand the next part of the story, you have to keep in mind that Moses was a man who had known disillusionment.

Forty years before he would have been eager to accept such a challenge. But hope had died, and he had become reconciled to things as they were.

There is no more fire in him.

He had even grown to like the quiet life, the unexciting life.

If there were few rewards, there were also few risks.

So when God came to him with the challenge, Moses began to make excuses.

Excuse Number One

He pleads *inadequacy*:

“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (3:11).

God answers him:

“Certainly I *will* be with you, and this shall be a 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).

Excuse Number Two

He pleads *ignorance*:

“Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall 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).

God answers him:

“*I am who I am . . .* Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘*I am* has sent me to you . . . Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations” (3:14-15).

My name is “I am that I am.”

This name means the Eternal One.

Or, if you want that in simpler form, just call me “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”⁴ (3:15), the special name by which my people shall know me.

That should have settled it.

So God gives more of the game plan to Moses (3:16-22).

But Moses *continues* to make excuses.

Excuse Number Three

He pleads *impotency*:

“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).

Notice that he directly contradicts God.

In effect, he calls God a liar:

God had said, “And they will pay heed to what you say” (3:18).

Now Moses says,

“What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say?” (4:1).

But how patient God is.

God says, “I will give you three signs” (4:2-9).

The **first sign** is for *the receptive*.

“Throw it [your rod] on the ground,”

God commands.

It became a snake.

“Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail,” Moses is told.

Moses did and it became a rod again.

The **second sign** is for *those who may be wavering*.

“Now put your hand into your bosom,” God says.

Moses did and when he pulled it out, it was in the last stages of leprosy—the skin had become thick and dead white, the flesh was ready to fall off the bones.

“Put your hand into your bosom again,” God instructs.

He did and the flesh was restored.

The **last sign** is for *the hardened who will contend that the gods of Egypt are greater than God*.

God says, “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.”

Okay, Moses, are you satisfied?

But Moses is not.

Excuse Number Four

He pleads *ineptness*:

“Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10).

The word translated “eloquent” literally means “a man of words.”

“Lord, I am not a talker. I have never been much of a talker and I have not seen any improvement in the time we have been talking together. I can still barely get the words out. It is hopeless, Lord,” Moses pleaded.

Can't you hear the sadness in God's answer?

“Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb 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).

Moses should have caught on by now, but like some of us, he is a slow learner.

Nothing is harder than overcoming disillusionment and reviving hope.

He makes one more effort to get out of God's plan.

Excuse Number Five

He pleads *indisposition*.

That is, “I am not disposed to go; send someone else.”

The text says, “Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever Thou wilt” (4:13).

That is the proverbial last straw.

God’s anger is kindled against him:

“Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses” (4:14a).

Moses had demonstrated a lack of faith in the *person* God had chosen (himself), in God’s *people*, in God’s *plan*, in God’s *provision*, and in God’s power.

Little wonder God is angered!

But He still gives an answer.

He says, “Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite?

I know that he speaks fluently” (4:14b).

Does this story sound familiar?

Does it come a little too close to home to be comfortable?

God comes to us where we live and says, “I have something I want you to do.

I want you to help lost men and women to come to know My love and provisions—and to be saved.”

Isn’t that exciting?

Like Moses, we, too, begin to make excuses:

Maybe we plead *inadequacy*:

“But, Lord, who am I?

You surely do not expect me to be a soulwinner!”

Or *ignorance*:

“Lord, I do not *know* enough.

They are liable to ask me questions I cannot answer.”

Or *impotency*:

“And, Lord, you have to understand that it is a skeptical old world out there.

Doubt and pessimism prevail.

People will not believe what I have to say.”

Or *ineptness*:

“Lord, I am not a good talker.

What you need is a supersalesman type.

I get all tongue-tied every time I try to talk about religion.

It is embarrassing!”

Or is it possible that we would even risk the anger of God and plead *indisposition*:

“Lord, send someone else—and I will just be a good church-attending, pew-warming Christian like everyone else.”

Have you been there?

Are you *still* there?

It may come as a surprise to discover that God does not call us to a task without making sure we have everything we need to do that task!

Feel *inadequate*?

God says, “I have given you talents and abilities that qualify you to do My will and glorify Me.”

For instance, note these great truths:

Ephesians 4:11 lists several gifts for the purpose of building up the church—and then verse 16 notes that when *every* member does *what he can*, the church will grow.

First Peter 4:11 implies that some have mouth gifts and some have hand gifts.

Romans 12:6-8 lists seven different gifts.

All are given to be used for *God’s* purposes and plans.

When Moses began to make excuses, God asked him, “What is that in your hand?” (4:2).

Moses was focusing on what he *did not* have.

God said, “You need to concentrate on what you do have.”

Use what you *have* to do what God tells you to do.

God says, “I do not make mistakes when I call someone.

You *can* do the job.”

Feel *ignorant*?

God says, “I have made provision for you.

I have given you two great gifts: a mind and a Bible.

Use your mind to learn what you need to know” (2 Timothy 2:15).

The main thing Moses needed to know was who *God* was—and the main thing you need to know is who *Jesus* is—what He did for us, and how we benefit through obedience.

You may not know everything, but you can know something.

If you cannot take people from A to Z, at least you can take them from A to B.

Feel *impotent*?

There is nothing wrong with trying to persuade men (2 Corinthians 5:11), but in the end we must come to realize that the power is not in us, but in God’s Word (Romans 1:16; 10:17).

We need to pray that God will help us find those honest, receptive hearts (Luke 8).

The second surprise is that God makes sure we have everything we need to *meet* the challenge He gives us.

This leaves one more surprise in our story, the greatest of all.

SURPRISE NO. THREE:

WHEN MOSES DID WHAT GOD TOLD HIM TO, HE WAS SUCCESSFUL

God had told Moses again and again that He would be *with* him.

All Moses needed to do was *trust* in the Lord and, on that basis, *obey* Him—and success was assured.

After God answered Moses’ last objection, there were no more excuses.

Exodus 4:18 and the verses that follow tell of Moses’ meeting the challenge with God’s help.

Thus is set in motion one of the greatest feats in human history:

The migration of 2 to 3 million people out of the Egyptian slavery to the land promised by God many years before!

Dwell on such great events as the crossing of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, the giving of the Ten Commandments, and the ultimate victories in the Promised Land.

The point is when Moses *did* what God said to do, he was *victorious*, even as God had promised.

This brings us back to *our* challenge.

We make all kinds of excuses for *not* doing what God has said, when what we *really* need to do is step out *by faith* to meet His challenge.

With the help of God, we *will* be victorious!

We have no burning bush, but we do have God's Word that should be like a fire in our bones (Jeremiah 20:9).

This Word speaks in clear unmistakable terms:

We are responsible for the salvation of the world—and *especially* for the salvation of the souls about us.

God has equipped us for the task.

In each congregation He has given a beautiful range of talents, abilities, and skills.

We need then to

- (1) *discover* those gifts,
- (2) *develop* those gifts, and
- (3) *deploy* (use) those gifts.

We need to understand that the *ultimate* purpose for those gifts is to bring men and women to the Lord and His way.

All that remains is for us to *do* what God has told us to do—believing that He will indeed be with us (Matthew 28:20).

God *will* give us the victory!

CONCLUSION

This Bible story has a special message for us.

It has a special message to those who, in days past, have become discouraged in the Lord's cause, who have perhaps even given up hope—as Moses had.

This story says that if you will put yourself in God's hands and let Him use you, you will be surprised at the great things that can still happen in your life.

This story has a special message for *all* of us—young or old, encouraged or discouraged.

Moses thought it was just another day, but it was a day of surprises—as God called him and stiffened Moses' backbone for the task ahead.

You may have come to this day thinking it is just another day, but it may have turned out to be a day of surprises for you, as you have been moved by God's Word; as you have been convicted that God is calling you to the task of saving the lost.

If that is the case, may God bless you and be with you as you translate the noble impulses of your heart into action.