

Meeting God

Exodus 2:23-3:22

How many of you wish that God would show up? That He would hear you saying, 'If you'd just give me some sign that you're there, that you're listening...' I wonder if you know what you're asking. What you're letting yourself in for. Don't be afraid... it's good. It's infinitely fuller than you ever realised. It's just a lot more hot to handle than you ever imagined.

In Exodus 3, we move on from the origin story of a man called Moses that we looked at last week, to his encounter with God on a mountain. An encounter that, actually, he didn't even ask for, but God decided to give him. An encounter that would not only change his life, but the world. An encounter with an awesome God who revealed something extraordinary about both who He is and who Moses was.

Just before chapter 3, we get these few verses at the end of chapter 2 where we get to see a cosmic cut scene. Where everything that happened in the ups and downs of Moses' first forty years comes together with the big plan God has.

During the time that Moses is away in the desert being a shepherd, the King of Egypt dies. That's the Pharaoh who had started this new policy of driving the Israelites hard as slaves and killing their first born sons to try to whittle them down and assimilate God's people into being 'just part of us and our country.' The question for the Israelites would be - would the next Pharaoh be different? Would political change bring about the freedom and true life they were waiting for?

Well... meet the new boss... same as the old boss... v.23 says that the Israelites were still in slavery, and they were groaning, crying out because of it. Political change can bring about good things or bad, and it's good for God's people to be involved for the good. But it can't bring about salvation. It can't bear the weight of that hope.

God's people - those who belonged to God because of His covenant, His binding promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - were crying out in their experience of suffering. And we read that the cry reached God's ears. And that God heard their cries... saw them... remembered His promises to them... and was concerned for them...

God moves in response to His people's cries. And if you wish God would move in response to yours, here's three questions for you: Firstly, are you crying out *to Him*? Or are you just complaining about Him? We don't read that the Israelites cried out *to God* - just that their cry 'went up to Him.' Is it that God's people had forgotten Him rather than the other way around? God moves when His people pray *to Him*, not when they talk *about Him*.

Secondly, are you *crying out* to Him? This isn't a 'God, if you could please give some attention to the below... God, did you get my email? Could I press you to respond, please?...' This is a guttural, total, no holds barred 'Aaaarrgghhh! Please HELP!' It's a leaning-all-your-heart-into-it prayer. It's a deep cry, not a shallow criticism. God moves when we pray like we totally *need Him*, not when we pray like we could 'do with a little help.'

Thirdly, what is God waiting for? Maybe yes, you're crying out to Him, and you're asking Him this third question! But what if actually, He's got an answer? As we'll see in chapter 3, God's plan for rescuing His people was going to involve judgement and destruction for some other people who had long deserved it - but in His patience with them, God was still giving time to the Egyptians and Canaanites; still willing to give mercy if they'd change. God moves when the time is right - could it be that His mercy for others means you need to wait a while?

Is your plea to God directed to Him? Is it deep or shallow? Is it patient?

Did anybody recognise this logo earlier on?

Explain CofS logo

In 3:1, Moses leads his flock of sheep to Horeb, the mountain of God. That's Mount Sinai. In this chapter, Moses is going to meet God. This will be the place of his encountering the presence of God... of receiving a commission from God... and of God revealing more and more of who He is to Moses. In chapter 19 and lots of what follows after, God will dramatically do the same thing with the people of Israel, as Moses leads God's people to this same place of encounter.

The starting point... always the starting point... is an encounter in the presence of the Holy God. It starts with noticing something. In v.2, we read that the 'Angel of the Lord' appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush.

In the Old Testament, the 'Angel of the Lord' (as opposed to just an 'angel') refers to the Presence of God Himself, and often comes in passages where we then read that it's really God speaking. But it's God accommodating Himself to be present with sinful human beings. Just as He did in Jesus Christ in the New Testament in the fullest way, veiled in flesh the Godhead seen, this was an Old Testament encounter of God speaking with a man in a way that wasn't going to dazzle him to death.

Now the thing was, burning bushes were not unusual in that desert. It was the fact that this one *wasn't* burning up that was unusual. It took Moses to be unhurried enough to see that something in the everyday wasn't exactly... *everyday*. Something was standing out, enough for him to choose to draw his attention to it...

What's going on in your life that you just notice isn't quite ordinary in your everyday experience? Something that won't burn out or fade away? What does God want you to pay attention to? It could be a verse from the Bible that keeps coming up... Maybe a conversation that keeps coming around... a person? A picture?

v.4, 'When God saw that Moses had gone over to look, God called to him... 'Moses! Moses!' What's God patiently repeating until you come and take a closer look, before He calls you by name? 'Here I am!' Moses doesn't run away at this point and get freaked out that it turns out, God actually *is* there and *does* have something to say.

In vv.5-7, Moses learns how to be in the presence of God. God is a fire. A fire draws us. But it burns us if we get too close. 'Do not come any closer,' God tells Moses. But He doesn't want Moses to leave. He wants him to stay - and he gives him the means to do it. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.'

Moses is in the presence of the Almighty God. Human beings can't be there, except that God gives them the means. Later in the Old Testament, He'll tell His people, 'make sacrifices of atonement for sin, because standing here in my Presence is holy ground.'

The beautiful, wonderful thing is we live as God's people through faith in Jesus - God says to us, 'Put your faith in my Son, who has given Himself as a sacrifice so that you can be here on this holy ground of my Presence.'

We're accustomed to praying whenever we like, wherever we like, and we do have that wonderful gift because of Jesus. Even more than that, Jesus taught us that because of Him, we don't need to think of God as unapproachable in case we burn, but as a Father we can run right up to and embrace with total trust and confidence.

But it's led to us praying *however* we like, too. Treating God like He's our peer, of the same stature as us; or worse, like He's smaller than us, like He's some servant to get cross at if He doesn't do as we say.

Let's not lose our sense of awe at the God whose presence we are in. The God whom Moses had to hide his face from because of His ever-burning hot holiness. The God who met Israel on that mountain later on in awesome, terrifying fire and smoke.

Jesus gave us the gift of coming into the presence of God, not least so we can come and marvel at His holy splendour, His above-and-beyondness, as well as His wonderful, Fatherly closeness. A.P. Baker says this:

'Unless we have been on our knees, more or less in tears, because of the holiness of God, we have not begun.'

What do you think the effect would be on your prayer life if you were more conscious of God's holiness?

In vv.7-9, God answers Israel's cry for help. Repeated in vv.7 and 9 are the phrases from 2:24 - He has seen them. He has heard them. He is concerned about them. And in between in v.8, God tells us what He's going to do about it. He's going to rescue them - to bring them *out of* the slavery they're in. And He's going to bless them - to bring them *into* a 'good and spacious land.'

There's deliverance from an old life. But there's also the inheritance of a new life. That's what God gives to His people in Exodus. The gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) write about Jesus like He is leading a new Exodus - leading people out of the slavery of sin and death and everything that robs humanity of real, full life - and leading people into the 'good and spacious land' - the infinitely fuller life - of knowing and following Jesus.

So, there's this great rescue and inheritance for His people coming... Moses' heart must have been thumping with anticipation at this point, excited to hear how it was all going to come about... then, God drops this bombshell in v.10.

‘So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.’ We know that’s coming when we know the story. But imagine what a bolt out of the blue this was for Moses! Remember, as we saw last week, he’d settled! He’d decided he’d found a comfortable, ordinary, bland life, and that was that.

But when God meets people, He gives them more than deliverance and inheritance. He also gives them a mission. Tim Chester suggests, ‘You want to hear God say, “I have seen... I have heard... I am concerned...” But you don’t hear Him because He’s also saying, “I am sending you...” Are you ready to hear that?’

Be careful what you wish for. If you want God to hear you, and make Himself obvious to you, don’t be surprised if He gives you a job to do when you encounter Him. A job that you feel completely inadequate for. Moses says in v.11, ‘Me? Who am I, that I could go and confront a king and lead a whole nation out of one land and into another?’

Now, how would you have answered Moses? The thing is, when someone says, ‘I couldn’t possibly do it...’ we like to encourage them and say, ‘Of course you could!’ We might say, ‘Well Moses, you’re actually pretty well placed - your history as a prince of Egypt and the last forty years experience leading a flock in this desert has been ideal preparation, really. Just believe in yourself.’

But God doesn’t answer that way. He tells Moses a much more helpful thing in v.12 - ‘I will be with you.’ God says, ‘Just believe in *me*.’ It’s not a confidence boost that Moses needs, it’s an awareness of the presence of God to lean on. God will meet him in the gulp moment where inadequacy and obedience meet.

All of us have a commission, given to us by Jesus. Matthew 28:18-20 - ‘All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Therefore *go* and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely *I am with you always*, to the very end of the age.’

That’s a commission for you, whether you’re just becoming a follower of Jesus or you’ve been one for years. It’s not optional. We don’t get to say, ‘I can’t do that, who am I to do that?’ We obey. Knowing that it’s being in the

presence of God that makes us able. If you don't know where to begin, begin there. Come into God's presence, really deliberately, before you go out to whomever and wherever He sends you.

What have you told God you can't do? What does 'I will be with you' spur you on to that you've held back from?

There's a sign that Moses gets to assure him that God's really sending him to do this in v.12. It's a sign to 'you' (Moses, singular). That when you've done what I tell you and brought the people out, 'you' (Israel, plural) will worship God on this mountain.' Do you notice when Moses gets the sign? It's not before setting about doing what God says - it's after it's done! What kind of assurance is that?

It's the kind that gets on with obeying God and not making excuses that you need Him to put lights in the sky before you do. That trusts that it will be in the looking back that everything will become clear. But where it does help Moses, right now, in this moment, is that it's a sign that when things look like they're going the wrong way and the long way, it's okay... God has purposes in that.

You see, God just told Moses that He would bring His people into the plentiful land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. But Mount Horeb was the wrong way! Israel would come out of Egypt, and would not be heading straight for the promised land. This was a sign from the start that, when the promise was a land flowing with milk and honey and the terrain was getting drier and drier, it was okay - God knew it, and meant it, and had the long game in mind.

I've spoken much about God telling our church to 'Increase in God's presence... take the land... watch out for false gods when you get there.' Well here in Exodus 3 is a clear call to treasure and rely on the presence of God.

And an opportunity to learn, ahead of whatever God is leading us into, that it's a long old journey. It might look like we're going backwards sometimes. We might ask, 'Why' are things around us getting drier and dustier?'. Things might get worse before they get better (that's what Moses is about to experience in chapters 5 and 6). So knowing that it's in God's character to assure us 'I will be with you... I told you this would happen...' should help us.

But Moses still isn't sure, and he's still got some questions. He's already asked, 'Who am I, God?' Now, in v.13, he asks, 'Who are you, God? What do I tell people about the God who is sending me?'

And God answers, 'I AM who I AM.' In the Hebrew, 'LORD' in v.15 sounds like and could be derived from 'I AM' in v.14. This is the personal name of God - Yahweh. A name so holy and precious to God's people when He revealed His name to them that they dared not even utter it.

What's in a name? Well, in this name was a great deal that God was revealing about Himself to Moses and to the people God was rescuing. There was no past, present or future tense in this 'I AM.' God could have been saying 'I have been whom I have always been,' or, 'I am who I am,' or, 'I will be what I will be.' Here, revealing His name and His nature to Moses, He was probably saying all three.

'I have been whom I have always been.' This is the God of the consistent track record of faithfulness. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as He introduces Himself to Moses. The God who made promises to those men and had shown himself faithful to seeing them through. The God who can be relied upon today because He's the same as the totally reliable God of yesterday.

'I am who I am.' You hear the world talking about 'who God is to them' or 'I don't think God would be like that' or, as one of my neighbours once put it, 'I think God is whoever you want Him to be.' But the world's got things backwards. People think they 'just are' and that God is whatever they want to make of Him. Actually, God 'just is,' and we are whatever God wants to make of us.

We human beings are defined by other things and other people. I am Scottish. I am Heather's husband. Anna's dad. I'm a reasonable runner and a poor footballer. I'm identified and constrained by the same things - my relationships, my physical and mental limitations, my environment. I'm ultimately defined by whether I'm in relationship with God or not - that's going to define me eternally.

But God is who God is. He is self-defining; He is who He is without dependence or reference to anything. He is absolute. Eternal. No beginning, no end, no cause or creator before Him. God just *is*. And He's the only one of whom that's true.

'I will be whom I will be.' God is, as He goes on to say, LORD. He determines all things. He is in charge of everything and how it will pan out. If He decides His people will be set free from Egypt, they'll be set free from Egypt. If He says it, He does it.

Jesus came to bring you to life knowing this God as your Father. To put your hand in His. To introduce you, personally, to this God who personally reveals Himself in this name, 'I AM,' and who says in v.15, 'This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.'

God's people are to know our God as the One who has always been consistent in making and being faithful to His promises. As the One who simply, and eternally just *is*. And as the One who will be LORD over every unfolding circumstance of the future.

We're to know and lean on this God of promises, presence and power. Tim Chester says, 'Because God is not constrained by others, we can be sure He *can* deliver. Because God *is* constrained by Himself, we can be sure He *will* deliver.'

So be careful what you wish for. If you want God to show up, you're in for an encounter with the Holy, awesome, great I AM. If you respond to Jesus' invitation to 'Come, follow me,' that's what you'll get. And He will set the agenda for you, and call you to something quite beyond you. But He says He will be with you, and that even as He takes you the long and unexpected route, His promises and power are enough to rescue and establish you in infinitely fuller life.