

# Moses Argues with God

*Exodus*

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Exodus 4:1, God has instructed Moses to go and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt,

1 And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.

"And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee." You remember when we looked at chapter 2, you remember how Moses couldn't wait to deliver the Israelites out of the hands of the Egyptians? You remember how he took the law, as it were, into his own hands and he slew that Egyptian? He had such a burden to deliver the Israelites and he had such conviction that God had raised him up for this purpose and he had such a conviction that God had raised him up for this specific purpose that he couldn't understand how the Israelites themselves couldn't see how God had raised him up for that purpose. Do you remember when the Israelites came back and said to him, "Who made you our ruler?" Now do you remember Stephen before he was murdered, he was defending himself before the Sanhedrin and in Acts 7:25 he's accounting what Moses did here and you have it said there, "For he," that is Moses, "supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not." His conviction was so great, his burden so heavy, he couldn't understand how no one else could see he was God's man for this work.

Now 40 years later, the time has come for Moses actually to deliver the people of Israel and he says, "I'm not going. I'm not the right man." Moses is unwilling to do it when God's time arrived. What has happened to Moses during those 40 years? Is it a case that it was so long for Moses to wait that he had lost his enthusiasm for it? No, we mustn't say that. We are far too quick to come in with our own answers, aren't we? Let's look at what we can learn from this passage. The man who was so impetuous to get on with his calling, when the time came he's arguing and quarreling and trying to think of every excuse under the sun why not to go.

Let's just go through the whole thing. Let's note, first of all, that 40 years in the desert, these 40 years taught Moses what 40 years in Pharaoh's palace had failed to teach him. What did he learn in the wilderness? What did he learn in the backside of the desert there that he didn't learn 40 years in the lap of luxury in the palace of Pharaoh in Egypt? He learned about four things. He learned, first of all, about himself. In the palace, he learned self-sufficiency, "I'm the man." In the desert he learned his insufficiency. He learned in

these 40 years a lot about himself. If he needed to go out of Egypt, he must learn about himself and, my friend, if you have to do anything for God, God will teach you about yourself.

Then, secondly, these 40 years in the wilderness Moses was taught about the task. In the palace he came to the conclusion, "I'm the man. I'm the one to lead them out." But 40 years in the wilderness taught him the task is beyond one man, "I'm not fit. I'm not qualified. The work is beyond me." If he had gone to do this great work, he had to find out all of what's involved, but 40 years in the wilderness taught him all that was to be involved.

The 40 years in the wilderness also taught him about the people, the people he was to lead out. What kind of people are they? Are they obedient? Do they immediately run to do what you said or are they a rebellious, stiff-necked people? He learned what kind of people we were, would he not? If he was to do that task, he would have to round about them.

But do you know the thing he learned most of all about in the desert? He learned about God. This was God's work. In fact, this was God's idea. It wasn't Moses' idea, it was God's idea and he learned about God. He learned that God was to be feared. He learned that God was to be loved. He learned that God was to be obeyed, God was to be followed, and he would have learned this, would he not: God's ways are not our ways. Moses would have had his plans, would he not? But you remember we looked at the possibility already when Moses already made a great move when he decided to run away from the palace, not fearing the wrath of the king. He must have thought to himself, "Now look, if I become the next Prime Minister, if I become the next Pharaoh," and it was likely to be his position, being the son of Pharaoh's daughter, "how influential I could be. How I could so easily change the laws of the land and lead Israel out if I stay in the palace." But he learned God's ways are not our ways.

You see, prosperity in the palace, prosperity in general, is unlikely to teach us, my friends, never mind prepare us and equip us for service. Is there not an adversity that God sends to someone he's equipping, someone he's preparing, someone he's building up for a task? It's not usually prosperity he sends to that person, it's adversity. And you know, loneliness, the loneliness of a desert is an excellent environment for learning, especially about yourself and especially about God. We need to be alone with God if we're going to be prepared, if we're going to be strong in God.

There are a couple of lessons surely that we should learn from this. Before we can be of any use to God, we need a healthy sense of our own inadequacy. Now, I say a healthy sense of our own inadequacy. You see, we can be too big for God to use. We can have big big ideas about our own sufficiency and God sometimes has to say, "He's too big for me to use," and he is to humble us and keep us down. Now, I say a healthy sense of our own inadequacy.

A second lesson from this is surely this: God may keep us weakened. It's not to frustrate our ambition, it is to prepare us and equip us. It's to make us strong in God. It's not to debilitate us, it's to strengthen us if we use it properly and if we use it aright.

It is absolutely vital for us, however, to note, secondly, that Moses hereby saying, "Not me, I'm not the man," that was not grace on the part of Moses, it was not piety on the behalf of Moses, it was not godliness, it was not humility. Do you know what it was? It was disobedience. That's what it was. It can never be right to say no to God. When God commands us to be something, it is not our prerogative to question God, to say, "I'm not the man." It is a serious reflection on God's wisdom, not to speak of being a reflection on his authority. Saying God's wisdom, are we saying God got it wrong? What actually are we saying when God asks us to do something and we say no, it's not for us? How God sometimes in providences puts us into situations and we say, do we not, we can't do it? We say we can't obey God. What are we saying about God who put us into that situation? What are we saying about his authority? And what are we saying about his wisdom? Does he not know that? It is not for us to question it, it's for us to obey.

There are a couple of lessons we could learn from that fact alone. 1. Is this: that disobedience can look awful like humility. Disobedience can look awful like humility but it's not. Secondly, unbelief can look awful like common sense. "How can I do that, Lord? That's beyond one man." It looks awful like common sense. But intelligence, logic, sense in the ultimate resides with God. God is the ultimate intelligence and sense and wisdom and what he says can never be nonsensical. It may look like it to you and me.

Let's look at Moses' excuses now. It began in verse 11 of chapter 3. "Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" His first excuse was that he felt incompetent. Now up to a point he was, of course, quite correct. He was incompetent in himself. Up to a point he's quite right here. You see, what training did Moses have as a diplomat in international negotiations? Here is God asking him to go into the court of Pharaoh and act to release these people. What training had he got? You see, it looked like common sense.

What was his task when you think on it? Think about it. We were looking on our screens, were we not, about how many refugees in the camp? What was Moses' task? It was to lead two million evacuees not into a refugee camp, but into a waste howling wilderness, no wonder Moses said, "Who am I? Who am I? I can't do that. It's beyond me." At one level, he was quite right but, you see, how does God answer him? What is the solution to that problem? It's basically this, is it not: it's precisely because Moses didn't feel up to it that he was likely to put his trust in God. Only God could do this mammoth task. And who was the one who is likely to put their trust in God? Those who don't trust themselves, those who see their inadequacy, those who feel utter incompetent. This work called for nothing short of divine power and God is trying to lead Moses to put his trust in God. "You can't do this. You're not involved in this."

Then God said to him something, he said, "Certainly I will be with you." Certainly. Here was a cast iron guarantee from God himself that he would always have his presence with

him. Always. What a guarantee he got from God there. "Certainly. It will be a certainty that I will be with you, Moses. You're never going to be alone. You're never going to be asked to do something in your own strength. I will perform miracles on your behalf."

But Moses goes on with a second excuse in verse 13. He feared rejection. God said, "Look, my presence will be with you. You needn't worry." Then Moses said unto God, "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?" Moses was terrified of being rejected by his people. Now, it is quite possible, of course, that Moses was still smarting from the brush-off which he got from these two Israelites so many years ago. He could still have been feeling sore about that and he could very well have remembered the last time he tried to do his work, he got the brush-off. "Who made you? Who are you thinking you are?"

In one way, he was still smarting from that experience, but on the other hand, you see, Moses had a basic problem here: how could Moses explain a call from God to lead the people out of Egypt? How could he explain that to a people who had grown up in a culture where every god had a name and God didn't even have a name? "I don't know what to say." Moses was afraid of being embarrassed. He was afraid of being ashamed. He was afraid of being rejected, as we said. "I don't even know your name, God. How can I face these people and say I have heard this voice from a burning bush?"

Well, how did God respond? How does God answer? You see, there is no need, Moses, to be ashamed. There is no need to be embarrassed when you're obeying God. You know, my friends, there is a lesson here for you. We sometimes are ashamed, aren't we, to witness for Christ? We're embarrassed and, really, it's the other people that should be embarrassed, really when you think of it. We have nothing to be ashamed of when we are doing what is right. When we are being obedient, we can stand tall. We can look our enemies in the eye when we are being obedient. It is when we are being disobedient that we need to be small, cowed, ashamed, embarrassed. When we are disobedient. There is no need to be ashamed, there is no need to be embarrassed when we're speaking for God, when we're speaking truth, when we're doing what is right.

I think I mentioned before, do you know what the IRA are saying to the children that are growing up? They're saying, "Always remember, son, you've got right on your side." That's what they're teaching them so they can have boldness, so they can have courage. They are doing what is right, they think, they've been told. When you are doing what is right, when we are being obedient to God, we should never be ashamed, we should only be ashamed and embarrassed when we're doing what we ought not to be doing.

And do you notice how God not only gives Moses his name but he fleshes it all out so that Moses can not only tell the Israelites what the God who called him is called, what his name is, but he's telling them what he's going to do for them, how he's going to spell it out for them. God did answer Moses when he asked him this question and you see the key? God answers genuine queries, genuine anxiety. It was a difficulty and so God met him at the point of his difficulty and gave him more than he actually requested.

But alas, he goes on to a third excuse. That's in the words of our text. Moses is worried about failure. He worries how he feels, his fear and failure. Thus 1 in chapter 4, "And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee." "Lord, if I go and say that to them, they just won't believe me. In fact, they'll probably not even listen to me, never mind believe what I'm going to say. They won't even listen." Well, at this point, of course, we see Moses is just simply making excuses. He's simply making excuses.

He has absolutely no business whatsoever for saying that, has he? Think of it. Verse 18, God has just set him in his instructions, "They will hearken to your voice." That's what God has just said. You see, God understands genuine concern, genuine anxiety. God appreciates that. God understands that, but God gets angry when we contradict his word. God had said to Moses, "They will hear. They will hearken to your voice." It's an entirely different thing to have a genuine concern on the one hand, and on the other hand to contradict what God has said. That's when God gets angry and that's when God has every right to get angry.

Well, we now come to Moses' fourth excuse, verses 10 to 12. God promises Moses divine presence. He promises Moses divine power. He promises Moses divine authority. And yet Moses still makes excuses. You see, they're just excuses. They're aren't reasons now, they're excuses. The problem with Moses is his heart. The problem with Moses is his attitude. God had spelt things out to him. God had assured him of his power, his authority, his presence, but there was no basis for him to say, "Oh," to make all these excuses. He said, "I'm not eloquent. I'm not a public speaker, Lord. I'm not articulate. I never was. I mean, I could never do this." Verse 10, "I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." He said, "Lord, I never was a public speaker, neither before you called me, not even since, all these years. I haven't learned to be articulate. I'm not a good public speaker."

How does God answer? How does God reply? How does God speak? God said, "Look, Moses, it's not how you speak my word that's important, it's what you speak. That's what's important. That is what is vital." We refer too much on eloquent orators. You remember what the current thing is said? You remember how they loved oratory, how they loved speeches? And they got letters from Paul, the great apostle and they said, "Hey, he is our man. You are a great public speaker." Do you remember what they said? 2 Corinthians 10:10, when they heard him speaking publicly, they were disillusioned. 2 Corinthians 10:10, "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." They like a good old public speaker, an orator and, my friends, we put far too much emphasis on eloquence. It isn't how we speak that's important, it's what we speak that's important. And God said to Moses, "I will put my words in your mouth. That's what I'll do. I'll put my words in your mouth and it's my words, the truth of them, not the way they're said, not in the wisdom of man's words, not in the eloquent but in the power of the truth, however they are framed."

Well, at last Moses is absolutely desperate as we see in verse 13, "Lord, send someone else." When he said, "O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send." He said, "Lord, I'm not going. Send someone else. I'm not the right man." And God, "And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well." God gets angry and you notice God does not grant Moses his request but he does send him Aaron, his brother, as a support. It seems the divine presence of God was not too helpful for Moses. He said, "I'd rather a physical help."

We're reminded of the story, aren't we, of the boy who was sleeping alone and was frightened in his bedroom and he called out to his daddy and he said, "Daddy, come here and sleep with me. I want my father with me." And the father said, "You're alright. You're alright. You'll be alright." And so he went out and left him but after awhile the boy cried out again and said, "Daddy, I want my father with me." And the father said, "Look, you've got your Father in heaven with you when you're sleeping here alone." The little boy thought for a long while and he said, "Yes, dad, but I want the father with skin on him."

Moses was like that. He wanted something he could feel rather than the presence of God and God gave him Aaron. But, oh, what Aaron turned out to be. A helpmeet. Isn't it Aaron that wrought folly? Isn't it Aaron that made the golden calf? Wasn't Aaron a form in flesh? But that's what he wanted and God gave it to him. Isn't there a lesson there for you and me? If we persist, God will give us what we want. If we persist. Remember the men of Israel? They said, "We want a king!" God said, "Alright, if you insist I'll give you a king in my wrath."

Well, I want to end with four lessons of application in general. 1. We must never go by feelings even when they are accurate. Even when they are accurate. Moses had a great task ahead of him. Moses was incompetent in himself for the task. His feelings were quite right. He wasn't wrong. But we don't go by feelings, sometimes because they're wrong and sometimes because they're right. They're not what God points us to. Maybe in providence today you've to go a duty tomorrow, when you have to face something of terror and your feelings are dead right. When they say to you, "He's going to be angry," but you know what your duty is. And God calls us to unpleasant duties to make us strong, not to make us weak, not to finish us off but to qualify us and strengthen us. Our duty is never dictated by our feelings. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're wrong. We go by the word of God, not our feelings.

Lesson 2: rejection is nothing to fear as long as we are obedient. If you say, "Look, what if they don't accept me? I go to them and say God has called me and he asked me that I lead you all out, what if they reject me?" Well, Moses, if they reject you, that's on their head. That's not on your head. You see, we've got the wrong idea of what success is. We define it incorrectly. What is success? It isn't the conclusion of the matter, it isn't how things actually turn out, it isn't the consequences of doing something. Success, true success is being obedient. True success is doing what you're meant to be doing. It's not the result, it's not the conclusion. We have to learn and it's very difficult to learn, we have

to learn to leave the consequences with God. Moses would have been successful if he went to them and said, "God has called me to lead you out. Come and follow me." And they refused to do it, Moses would have been successful because he did what he was asked to do. We fear the wrong thing. The only thing we ought to fear is being disobedient, in not doing what we are meant to be doing. Consequences, results are not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to do what we're meant to be doing. That's success. Being what you're meant to be, being what you're meant to be doing.

Now, thirdly, conversely, what is the only failure? It's just the opposite. Failure is disobeying God. You see, if Moses didn't go out to these people, maybe our response would be, "Oh, you're a wise man, Moses." If he had never gone, "You're a wise man. He did the right decision." What is failure? Failure is disobeying God, not doing what you're meant to be doing. That's failure. That's the only failure.

But finally we close with this: distrust in self is only a grace if we trust in God. All the 40 years in the wilderness teaches Moses his insufficiency would have been nothing if he didn't put his trust in God. You see, we have to learn by faith in God, not by insecurity in ourselves do we get to heaven. The whole exercise of seeing our inadequacy is designed to lead us to put our confidence in God and we have no faith and we are not right if we only distrust ourselves. You see how people say, "Oh, who am I? I'm nothing. I can't do anything." You can do what God has asked you to do. You can do what God brought you into the world to do. There is something you can do. There are probably a thousand you can't do, but there is something you can be and that's what God created us for. But we mustn't stop at seeing our inadequacy, we must go one to see that our sufficiency is of God. We've got to trust him. That's the grace. There is no grace in seeing how rotten we are if it doesn't lead us to put our trust alone in Jesus.

May God, the Holy Spirit, make his word and his truth effectual to each one of us. Let's pray.

*O Lord God, we pray for thy Holy Spirit, that he himself might teach us to follow thee whatever the price, whatever the cost. Help us, O Lord, to hear your voice speaking to us and give us the grace and the courage to cheerfully follow you. O our God, hear us in mercy. Pardon our innumerable sins and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.*