

Sermon 7, The Self-Feeding Fire, Exodus 3:1-6

Proposition: God is a fearsome holy fire who has a history with your family and will not let death keep you in its clutches.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, WIRED magazine recently had an article on forest fires. This article talked about the conventional wisdom on forest fires, how their direction and speed can be predicted, and so on. And it talked about how that conventional wisdom has been shattered in recent years with the rise of mega-fires, gigantic blazes that cover dozens of square miles and suck in air and even fuel from all directions. These fires create their own hot, dry weather and can burn in directions that the conventional wisdom was totally unable to reckon with. And they are coming, the article emphasized, to a forest near you. Well, our text this evening exploits the image of fire to tell us something about God. The Angel of Yahweh, it says, appeared to Moses as a flame of fire. Some translations say "in," but I think that "as" is likely a better translation here. The divine fire came down on a bush, and Yahweh spoke to Moses from the midst of the fire. This was how God chose to address the suffering of His people, suffering that had no political solution. He came to Moses in fire that did not burn up the bush. Why? Because our God is a consuming, living, self-feeding fire, as His name indicates. (We'll get to that name in a few weeks.) What I hope to show you tonight is that our God is a fearsome holy fire, that He has a history with your family, and that His "firepower" (sorry; bad pun) is powerful enough to burn up even death.

I. Shepherding at the Mountain of God, v. 1

At first glance, v. 1 is just providing a little backstory. But I want to remind you that this verse is not a one-off kind of thing. Rather, it is yet another instance of the “through the waters, to the mountain, for worship” pattern that has already appeared over and over in Scripture. In the beginning, the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. From the waters the earth emerged at God’s command, and from the earth God made man and placed Him on the mountaintop of Eden. There the man worshipped God. The same pattern took place in the life of Noah, who went through the waters of the flood, landed on a mountain, and proceeded to worship. Now Moses, delivered from the waters, has come to the mountain. As alert readers, we know that mountains are associated with God. And Exodus 3:1 informs us immediately that this particular mountain, Mount Horeb, is the mountain of God.

Whoa.

We have come through the wilderness with Moses, who is living a low-impact lifestyle and shepherding his father-in-law’s flock. Now, let’s talk for a moment about shepherding. What is this activity? In those days, to be a shepherd meant that you go out and watch the flock. You don’t watch them for an hour or two. You watch them nonstop. You are with them 24/7. You take them to wherever the grass is. You find them water. You keep away the predators and thieves. You do everything that needs to be done to take care of those animals. There is no such thing as paid time off, vacation, or savings. If you want meat, milk, and leather, you have no choice but to carefully watch that flock. And Moses is not a rich man like Abraham who could afford to hire someone else to watch his flocks. No. Moses is the hired guy. It’s not even his flock. After 40 years, he’s still working for his father-in-law.

Brothers and sisters, in v. 1 we are looking at a man who is not exactly a mover and shaker. He didn’t have 12 sons like his ancestor Jacob. He didn’t have a ton of wealth like Abraham and Isaac. He lived a very modest lifestyle, still working for someone else at 80 years old. He’s not a religious leader; that’s his father-in-law. Let’s just say that we probably would not look at this particular shepherd and say “That’s the one. Let’s hire him for the job of delivering God’s people.”

But brothers and sisters, if that’s how we think about biblical religion, we are wrong. The Bible is not the story of the wise, smart, spiritually aware, etc. getting their wonderful reward. Not at all. It is about ordinary people to whom God shows Himself, ordinary people that He rescues. The point is not spiritual sensitivity, moral excellence, or anything else about the people in question. The point is God’s presence and power. And that is abundantly shown in the remainder of this long conversation with God. This is one of the longest conversations with God in the entire Bible. We’re going to talk about it at length in the weeks to come, but I just want to challenge each of you with God’s call right now. Is God calling you to do something? To serve as an officer in this church? To give to the poor? To cut out some of your TV time and use that time to get a pen pal whom you can encourage in godliness? To volunteer at some charitable organization? Brothers and sisters, I challenge you to listen to God’s call. If your excuses sound like Moses’ excuses, that tells me that your excuses are worth as much as his were.

Moses, the non-mover and non-shaker, has come to the mountain of God. This didn't happen by chance. God brought him through the waters to the mountain. And there, He told Moses a thing or two about Himself.

II. The Angel of Yahweh Appears as a Flame of Fire, v. 2

Well, Moses is found doing his work, being faithful in the ordinary things. He isn't found relaxing on the divan, nor is he found aggrandizing himself in Pharaoh's court. He's found doing a menial, tough job faithfully. And it was as he did that job that God chose to show Himself to Moses.

A. Our God Is a Consuming Fire, v. 2a

God appeared as a blazing fire. Why? Throughout the ages, Christian and Jewish commentators have indulged in all kinds of ridiculous statements about this, usually circling around the idea of the bondage and pain of Israel in Egypt "passing through the fire" or something like that. But the real answer is far simpler. God didn't appear as fire in order to remind Moses that back in Egypt his people were suffering. No. God appeared as fire in order to tell Moses something about Himself. Moses got the message; later, in Deuteronomy, he wrote "Our God is a consuming fire." In its heat, in its light, in its strength and terror and power, fire is like our God. God is passionate, zealous, eager for the salvation of His people. He is a consuming fire that will, in the end, burn off our sins and purify us for Himself.

B. Our God Is a Self-Subsisting Fire, v. 2b

Yet though God is a consuming fire, what that emphatically does *not* mean is that He will burn up everything. He is not some kind of nihilistic Joker, maniacally saying "Everything burns!" Rather, His likeness to fire lies in His hot energy and power. But He is unlike fire in that He needs no fuel. He is a self-subsisting fire. That is why the bush did not burn up. God does not need fifteen bushes per hour to keep Him going. He does not have a miles-per-gallon rating. He can go an infinite number of miles without using any fuel, without burning or consuming anything, because He is self-fed, self-kindled, self-existent. Moses saw the bush burning without being burned up, and he knew that the fire was not an earthly fire that burns up its fuel and then goes out. Clearly, it was a self-existent fire, a fire that could burn in the bush without needing the bush. And as we will see in the weeks to come, just as the vision emphasized the self-subsistent nature of our God, so the name God revealed to Moses emphasized the same thing. It was all about God's being, His "is-ness." He lives, He burns, without fuel, without bush.

III. God Reveals Himself; Moses Sees His Revelation, vv. 2-3

Moses, then, turns aside to see this great sight. A self-subsisting fire is the equivalent of perpetual motion. It is self-perpetuating heat energy, just as perpetual motion is self-perpetuating mechanical energy. No wonder Moses was struck by the wonder of the self-existent God of consuming fire that did not consume the bush, but burned by and of itself. Indeed, we suddenly see that the alchemist's search for perpetual motion is nothing other than the soul's search for God, for He alone is a self-feeding fire. He alone is perpetual motion, or pure act as the philosophers call it.

Now, what I want you to see is the glorious truth that the self-feeding fire met with Moses, spoke with Moses, even condescended to argue with Moses. The issue here is the movement of revelation, which I attempted to capture in the heading of this third point. God showed Himself. That's objective. That's what v. 2 says. And Moses looked at God. That's subjective. It's a description of Moses' perceptions. That dynamic is at play throughout this entire section, as God speaks and Moses responds. It is a conversation, not just pronouncements from on high but God actually listening, responding, even volunteering information for the sake of delivering His people. Do you know this God of the Exodus? Is your God this God, who came to Moses and showed Himself as a consuming but self-subsisting fire?

A. God Initiates the Conversation, v. 4

God started it. He spoke first. And He knew Moses' name. He had attracted Moses by showing Himself as a self-feeding fire. And then He called to Moses from the middle of the bush. Just as the Bible begins with God, who in the beginning created, so the Bible continues with God, who called to Moses from the bush, thus initiating the conversation.

When has God initiated with you? How have you seen evidence that He sought you before you sought Him? Why, after all, did Moses come to the mountain of God? Because God providentially brought him there in his wanderings around after the flock in its search for grass to eat. Why did God speak to Moses? Because He had something to tell him. And why does God speak to you and me, in His word, in His church, and in His providence? Because He has something to tell us as well. That message is primarily going to be about Himself. The revelation God gave Moses incidentally touched on topics like Pharaoh's future behavior, but its main theme was God disclosing to Moses who He was and what He was going to do.

B. God Is Holy, v. 5

The first thing that God showed about Himself was His holiness. In other words, as soon as the preliminary greetings were over, God led with an imperative. Why?

1. He Makes the Ground Holy, v. 5b

Well, the reason for the imperative is not stated until the end of the verse. Even there, it is phrased in terms of the holiness of the ground. Yet clearly the implication is not that Yahweh chose to manifest himself on ground which was already holy, and whose holiness both He and Moses had to respect. Far from it. The point is not the ground's holiness, but Yahweh's. By telling Moses "You are on holy ground," Yahweh was announcing His own holiness. This is actually the first occurrence of the noun form of "holiness" in the Bible. (The verb form appears once before, in Gen. 2 to describe what God did to the Sabbath day.) What is holiness? It is all about purpose. To be holy is to exist for a particular purpose — in particular, of course, in Biblical usage, to exist for God. To say that the ground is holy is to say that it is ground for God to be on. Holiness doesn't change what a thing is, only what it is for. Holy ground is ground whose existence is for the purpose of glorifying God.

2. He Sets the Terms of Approach to His Holiness, v. 5a

That's why God leads with "stay back and take off your shoes." These commands are significant not because shoes have some deep spiritual meaning, but because the commands show very

clearly that God sets the terms of approach to His holiness. Moses is not holy enough to stand up close to God. Moses is not holy enough to approach God on Moses' terms; Moses has to do it on God's terms.

Have you learned this lesson? When you hear a command like "Stand back! Take your shoes off!" is your first thought "Why?" or is it "Wow. My God is holy!"?

Brothers and sisters, we have to recognize and realize the holiness of God. We desperately need to come to grips with the truth that He sets the terms of access to His presence. That means that we can't do what we like and call it worship. We can't make up the moral rules that seem good to us and call it holiness. No. Worship, approach to God, holiness — all these things are on God's terms and only on His terms. That was the point of Moses needing to take his shoes off. Ordinarily, God does not make an issue out of shoes. But here He does because He wanted to say up front "My holiness is my affair, and you are going to respect it."

C. God Dominates the Conversation, vv. 4, 5, 6, 7-10, etc.

Besides leading with His holiness, notice, too, that God dominates the conversation. He does respond carefully to Moses; His answers track with Moses' questions. But the unavoidable fact remains that in this conversation God does most of the talking. Just notice how vv. 5, 6, and 7 all begin with "and He said." Though each verse seems to be a complete statement, the kind of thing that Moses could respond to if he were minded to do so (and in v. 6 he does respond by gesture), he doesn't. God just keeps talking.

Do you know this God? He's a great listener. That's the truth of prayer. But He is also very open in revealing Himself. And that is the truth of revelation.

D. God Has a History With Moses' Family, v. 6a

Once the preliminary declaration of God's holiness and its implications for Moses are made clear, God describes His history with Moses' family. Brothers and sisters, this God who dominates the conversation in His holiness is a God who has a history with your family. I know that very few of you are the first Christians in your families. Almost all of us are like Moses, in that God has a history of dealings with our biological family. But even aside from that, all of us are part of this church family, and this church family certainly has a history with God.

1. That History Is Summed up by "Being the God of"

Notice first of all that God repeats the phrase "the God of" four times in this verse. He was the God of Moses' father, and of the three patriarchs. What does it mean to "be God of"? The phrase is absolutely key throughout the Bible. It occurs from Genesis to Revelation, at the beginning and down to the end. The phrase is associated with the covenant promise that we saw last week. Indeed, if you look at the language of "covenant" and the language of "being God of," you will see that the two phrases are used interchangeably. The classic example of this is in Genesis 17, where God makes a covenant with Abraham and the covenant is to be God to him and to his seed. So for God to be in covenant with someone is to be that person's (really, that group's) God. God binds Himself to His people and their children. That binding, that commitment, is expressed in terms of covenant or in terms of being the God who belongs.

In human terms, I am in covenant with Alexa. There is no question, no discussion, no debate about whether I stick with her and she sticks with me. Leaving, divorce, breaking up — those are not options. I am hers. She’s mine. And that possessive element is precisely what’s in view in “being God of.” God claims Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He claims Moses’ father. And He lets Himself be claimed by them. To say “My God” is to invoke the covenant, to speak of the God who is your God.

2. “Being God of” Travels Down Family Lines

I want you to notice, secondly, that “being God of” travels down family lines. Moses’ father, Amram, had Yahweh for his God. The announcement that God is the God of Moses’ father clearly implies “And I will be your God too.” After all, in addition to naming Moses’ father, God goes on to name three of his great-grandfathers. Clearly, this covenant whereby God commits to particular people includes their children. Of course, the Almighty said so in so many words in Gen. 17, when He described His covenant as a promise to be God of Abraham and his seed after him.

Do you claim God for yourself — and your children? Do you seek to train your children to know Him? I know that most of you do. And I praise God for that.

3. “Being God of” Conquers Death, Matt. 22:32

Indeed, I want to go a step farther. Most of us are fairly pathetic readers of Scripture. We do not know how to read it like Jesus did. Jesus used this very passage to show the Sadducees that the resurrection is real because God said “I am the God of Abraham,” not “I was the God of Abraham.” The implication that our Lord draws out, in other words, is that to be in covenant with God is to receive an indestructible life. If God is your God, you will rise again. He will not be your God through your life but then abandon you at physical death. Far from it. Once He commits to you and becomes yours, He will never abandon you, not before you die, not when you die, and not after you’re dead.

That was all in God’s declaration to Moses. Did Moses understand everything in that declaration at the time? Probably not. But it was there all right. The God of Moses’ father appeared to Moses and revealed Himself as the Holy God who was and is and will be Moses’ God.

E. God Produces Fear by His Presence, v. 6b

And that was terrifying. Later on in Exodus, we will see the unabashed and many-times-repeated statement that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. That ought to scare you. And hearing that he was in the presence of his father’s God scared Moses. It was not the burning bush that terrified him; it was the God in the bush. God is not safe. He’s not cuddly. In the fire of His jealousy all the earth will be devoured! Yes, Zephaniah 1:18 says that. If you think you would not have covered your face, then you have not yet gotten the point of God’s revelation. You have missed it. The holiness, the awesomeness, the self-subsisting fire — that’s what Moses saw. That’s what attracted him towards the bush, yes. And it is glorious and beautiful beyond mortal endurance. But it is a sight to make you afraid from the very depth of your being. Now, as we will see next

week, Moses' fear didn't appear to affect his tongue. He was ready enough to argue with God. But that fear did affect his demeanor. He hid his face.

Do you know this fearsome and terrible God? Is the God you serve one who makes you shake in your boots? If not, then you may not be worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Amram. You might be worshipping an idol that you've imagined for yourself. The real God protects His holiness, dominates the conversation, and inspires fear. That's because He is the self-subsisting Fire. Worship Him as the God who cannot be quenched. Amen.