

"THE BURNING BUSH"

I. Introduction

- A. One of the most fundamental truths of biblical religion is that the God who made the world continues to superintend over all that takes place in the world.
1. While this is the clear teaching of Scripture, it is not something that is immediately apparent to us.
 2. From our perspective, the things that transpire around us seem to be determined by factors that are themselves a part of the world.
 3. This is the normal experience of all people in all places across all of history.
 4. Most of the time, God's involvement in his world is hidden to the human eye.
 5. This was certainly the case for the people of Israel during the four hundred years in between the era of the patriarchs and the days of Moses.
- B. This began to change on the day when God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush.
1. On that day out in the wilderness, God appeared to Moses in a visible form and spoke to him.
 2. It was one of those rare moments in which God made his presence known in an unmistakable way.
 3. It was the beginning of an era in which things of this nature would happen with considerable frequency, as God stretched out his mighty arm to set his people free from their bondage in Egypt.

II. On Holy Ground

- A. We saw last week that Moses had to leave Egypt and take up residence among the Midianites.
1. The New Testament tells us that Moses spent forty years as shepherd in Midian.
 2. The fact that he became a shepherd indicates that he thoroughly renounced all of his connections with the Egyptians, even though he had been raised in Pharaoh's palace.
 3. The book of Genesis tells us that "every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians." (Gen. 46:34)
 4. Moses' willingness to take up this despised vocation tells us that he no longer saw himself as an Egyptian.
- B. Like other shepherds, the Midianites were a nomadic people, taking their flocks wherever they could find good pasture.
1. On this particular occasion, Moses led his flock to a place called Horeb.
 2. Horeb is another name for Sinai, the place where God will set up his covenant with Israel after he brings them out of Egypt.
 3. This is why it is described as "the mountain of God."
- C. While Moses was at Horeb, the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush that was not consumed by the fire.
1. Biblical scholars refer to this sort of thing as a theophany.
 2. A theophany is an instance in which God visibly appears to people.

3. Two well-known theophanies from the book of Genesis are the appearance of the smoking fire pot and flaming torch to Abraham and the man who came and wrestled with Jacob at Peniel.
 4. The burning bush theophany was probably symbolic of God's holiness.
 5. The writer of Hebrews picks up on this kind of symbolism when he tells us that God is to be worshipped with reverence and awe because he is a consuming fire.
 6. While that is certainly true, the thing that gets Moses' attention as he looks at this bush is that it is not being consumed by the flames.
 7. This may be symbolic of God's independence and self-sufficiency, or perhaps it points to the fact that God will make a way for his presence to dwell in the midst of his people without consuming them.
- D. You may have noticed that verse 2 says that it is the "angel of the LORD" who appears in the burning bush but that verse 4 says that it is God who calls out to Moses from the bush.
1. This is one of a number of Old Testament passages where the angel of the LORD is closely identified with the LORD himself.
 2. The Hebrew word "angel" simply means messenger.
 3. While it can refer the created beings that we refer to as angels, it can also be used in other senses.
 4. In passages like ours, the angel of the LORD is the agent through whom God mediates his presence to his people.
 5. Because God is holy, he always has to relate to us through a mediator.

6. The mediator in this passage is simultaneously distinguished from God and identified as God.
 7. The only person who fits that description is Jesus Christ, who is the one true mediator between God and man.
 8. For this reason, it appears that this angel of the LORD is a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.
- E. As Moses proceeds to take a closer look at the bush, God does two things.
1. First, he calls out to Moses saying, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."
 2. Second, God reveals himself as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."
 3. Moses needs to know two things before he can draw near to the Lord.
 4. He needs to be told who it is that he is approaching, and he needs to listen to God's instructions for how to approach him.
 5. The same principles hold true for us in when we draw near to God in worship.
 6. We need to listen to God's revelation of who he is and how he is to be worshipped.
 7. We are not free to imagine God to be whoever we want him to be.
 8. We are not free to approach him in whatever way we like.
 9. As the Westminster of Confession of Faith explains, "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may

not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men... or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." [WCF 21.2]

- F. God commanded Moses to remove his sandals because this was a way to display reverence.
1. Moses was not to tramp upon this ground as he did other ground.
 2. He was not to be casual as he approached God.
 3. This ground was holy.
 4. It was not inherently holy or permanently holy, but during the time when God was making his presence manifest there it was set apart from other ground.
 5. Moses' response to the Lord shows us that he got the point that the Lord was making here.
 6. He hid his face because he was afraid to look at holy God.
- G. One other thing that we should note about this first part of the passage is that God is the one who takes initiative.
1. Moses did not go out into the wilderness in hopes of having a mystical encounter with God.
 2. God is the one who manifested himself to Moses.
 3. God is the one who called out to Moses and revealed himself through his Word.
 4. God always has to take the initiative if we are going to have a relationship with him.
 5. This is why we always begin our worship services with a Scriptural call to worship.

6. It reinforces the fact that God is the initiator in our relationship with him.
7. We do not seek him; he seeks us and calls us to himself.

III. "I Will Be with You"

- A. After revealing himself to Moses, the Lord explains that he has heard the cry of the Israelites in Egypt.
 1. He tells Moses that he has come to deliver his people and to bring them into a land of their own.
 2. God conveys his heart to Moses here, and he does so because he wants Moses to take what he has heard and convey it to the people of Israel.
 3. He wants them to know that he has not abandoned them.
 4. He has not forgotten the promises that he made to the patriarchs.
 5. He is not going to leave them in their state of bondage.
- B. God's love for his people today is the same as it was in Moses' day.
 1. His love for us is not based upon anything that we do.
 2. It is based upon his covenant.
 3. It is based upon what he has promised to do for all of those whom he has given to his Son.
 4. If you are a Christian, you can take comfort in the fact that God knows your trials and temptations.
 5. He sees your suffering, your sorrows, your frustrations.
 6. He has not forgotten you or left you to fend for yourself.

7. He is with you.
 8. He is at work even now, preparing you for the blessed inheritance that Jesus Christ has secured for you.
- C. In verse 8 God says, "I have come down to deliver them out of the land of the Egyptians."
1. But then in verse 10 God tells Moses, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."
 2. This tells us that while God is the one who will bring about the deliverance, he is going to do it through the agency of Moses.
 3. God certainly didn't have to do it this way.
 4. He didn't need Moses.
 5. He could have spoken directly to Pharaoh all on his own.
 6. But that is not what he did.
 7. He redeemed his people through the ministry of Moses.
 8. We see the same sort of thing in the New Testament era of redemption.
 9. Jesus is the one who is building his church, yet he does so through the ministry that he has given to his church, a ministry that he makes effectual by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- D. When Moses hears that he is being sent to Pharaoh, he is taken aback.
1. Who is he, a man who has been a lowly shepherd for the past forty years, that he should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

2. Moses' response is understandable.
 3. He is right.
 4. He is not sufficient for such a task.
 5. But God assures Moses that he will be with him.
 6. God will bless him and equip him for what he is being called to do.
 7. God's presence with Moses is what will make the difference.
 8. Moses himself is nothing.
 9. He is not adequate for the task, but the God who has called him to this task is more than adequate for it.
- E. God's words to Moses remind us of Jesus' parting words to his disciples at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.
1. After commissioning them to make disciples of all nations, Jesus assured them by saying "I am with you always, to the end of the age."
 2. That promise still holds true for Christ's followers today.
 3. Jesus is with us by the power of his indwelling Holy Spirit.
 4. He will ensure the success of his church's mission, in spite of all the things we do to mess it up.
 5. The same is true for our individual areas of calling.
 6. As we think about the many things that the Lord calls us to do, we sometimes feel that we are inadequate for the task.
 7. Don't let that prevent you from carrying out your duties.

8. Because Jesus is with you, you can have confidence that he will equip you for everything that he calls you to do.

IV. "I Am Who I Am"

- A. We turn now to the last section of the passage, which begins with Moses asking God a question.
 1. He asks, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"
 2. This is another understandable response on Moses' part.
 3. The people of Israel would expect him to be able to tell them something about the God whom he claimed to represent.
 4. He wants to know God's name because, in the Bible, a person's name sums up who they are.
- B. God tells Moses that his name is, "I AM WHO I AM."
 1. This is a rather unusual name.
 2. It is formed from the verb "to be."
 3. The name 'Yahweh' (sometimes pronounced Jehovah) is a shortened form of the phrase that God uses here.
 4. Whenever you see the name "LORD" in all capital letters in English Bibles, it is translating the Hebrew name 'Yahweh.'
 5. While we cannot know the full meaning of this divine name, it is generally agreed that it points to God's self-existence.
 6. He is independent and eternal.
 7. He will not be defined by the ideas and expectations of men.
 8. He defines himself.

9. He reveals himself on his terms.
- C. After telling Moses his name, God commands him to go to three groups of people: the people of Israel, the elders of Israel, and Pharaoh.
1. God then displays his knowledge of the future by telling Moses that the elders of Israel will listen to him and that Pharaoh will not.
 2. Because of the hardness of his heart, Pharaoh will only relent when he is compelled by God's mighty hand.
 3. The Israelites will not owe their deliverance to Pharaoh's leniency.
 4. Exodus tells the story of a great contest, a contest that features the Lord on one side and Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt on the other.
 5. God will display his power in such a way that it will be clear that it is he, not Pharaoh or Egypt's gods, who is sovereign over this land.
- D. Notice also what Moses is to tell Pharaoh about the reason why the Israelites are asking to leave.
1. They want to go so that they can sacrifice to their God.
 2. This tells us something important about the purpose of redemption.
 3. God doesn't set us free so that we can do whatever we want with our lives.
 4. He sets us free so that we can worship and serve him.
- E. What are we to make of the fact that Moses was instructed to ask for permission for only "a three days journey" when God has

already said that his purpose is to bring his people out of Egypt for good?

1. Was God instructing Moses to deceive Pharaoh?
 2. I don't think so.
 3. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart offers some helpful thoughts on this in his commentary on Exodus.
 4. He says that in the ancient world, the phrase "three-day journey" was used as an idiom for a major trip, a trip that would actually take much longer than three days.
 5. Stuart compares Moses' request for a three days journey to a teenager asking his dad, "Can I have the keys to the car?"
 6. The dad knows that his son isn't just asking if he can hold the car keys for a few minutes.
 7. He wants to take the car, even though he doesn't say it directly.
 8. Moses was probably doing something similar to that here.
- F. The last thing that God says to Moses in this chapter is that the Israelites will not leave Egypt empty handed.
1. They will plunder Egypt as if they had conquered it.
 2. By the time Pharaoh finally relents, the Egyptians will be so eager to get rid of the people of Israel that they will load them up with gifts in order to encourage them to be on their way.
 3. This will fulfill what God said to Abraham in Genesis 15: "I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions." (v. 14)

4. By doing this, God made sure that his people were well-equipped for their forty year sojourn in the wilderness.
5. Take note of what this tells us about God's compassion toward his people.
6. He provided for them in this way even though it would be their own sin that would cause them to be in the wilderness for so long.

V. Conclusion

- A. Like the people of Israel in Egypt, we all experience suffering and affliction in varying degrees and in varying forms.
- B. God does not make his presence visible known to us in the way that he manifested himself to Moses on that day in the wilderness, but if we belong to Christ we have his promise that he will always be with us.
- C. And as Paul reminds us in Romans 8, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (vv. 31-32)