

The Bush was not Consumed

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Exodus

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Probably most of us have prayed for some things for a long time, perhaps even good things. Maybe we've prayed for healing or for strengthening or for wisdom or for victory over a particular besetting sin and we've prayed and we've prayed and we've prayed, maybe we've prayed for a family member or a relationship, and as the weeks passed and as the months passed, we began to get impatient and we began to wonder, "If I want this good and this holy thing, why does the Lord not answer my prayer? Why does it seem that the Lord is perhaps even distant?" We just sang of that, a Psalm where God's people felt as if the Lord was distant.

Well, it's good to be reminded that God's people in the past didn't just have to wait for weeks for their prayers to be answered, they didn't have to wait for months, they didn't have to wait just for years, at times they had to wait for decades and even centuries, and their problems over those years, those decades and centuries even seemed to get worse and worse and worse, and then at the end of this 400 year trial or towards the end around 300 and some odd years into it, the Lord had placed Moses in the palace. Now for Moses and his family, maybe they began to see God's hand in that and they remembered those old stories of Joseph and maybe their hopes were coming up, men like Moses and Aaron, but now there's been a setback. Moses has been keeping sheep in the wilderness, he's had to run from Pharaoh, he's keeping sheep for his father-in-law not for seven years, not for a few months, not for 14 years like Jacob, but now for 40 years almost. Moses has been watching his father-in-law's flock. Here he would have been probably in his last 70s if you put all the timelines together. Now that would have been more like late middle-age in those days but this was a long life of waiting and God's people certainly had been praying. They'd been crying out. Some of the words for their groaning and their crying out in these times is more like screaming and weeping. They're under horrible horrible hardship. Think of the way Jews were treated in WWII. That's what it's like here under Egypt. It's horrifying. Abused, used and murdered, defeated and helpless all the day long.

So when we pray for good and holy things, we need to be reminded ultimately that we need to trust the Lord and his wisdom, and we pray for revival or for conversions or for strength in church work, utterly dependent on him and it should bring us to our knees.

There may be at times years and decades of wandering, of dry places, of being lost, but even in times like this, there's this great hope that we're going to come across in this passage and the hope is that God remembers his covenant. That's really what's happening here. God does visit his people. Those people that cry out to him, it may not be of their time and it may not be when they wish, but he revives and he visits and he comes down to his people and here we're going to see that in this picture of the burning bush.

We're going to look at the theme: the bush was not consumed. The bush was not consumed. It's actually a tragic scene when you think about it. Here's Moses, late 70s, and he's tending his father-in-law's flock. Now just think of that for a moment, just that alone. If you're in your late 70s and especially at this time, Moses who was formerly a great man who grew up in a great place, and now he's not even shepherding his own flock. He's an employee. Up until now, this is not one of the great men of the Bible if you think about it, or at least not in the sense of Abraham having all those flocks and herds and all those blessings, even Lot. No, here's Moses and he's nothing really. He'd grown up with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was mighty in words and deeds. Acts 7, he had loads of potential. He was in that privileged position, now he's an aging shepherd working for another man. He's wandering. He's at the back of the wilderness.

You know, we live in a society that promises instant gratification, fast-acting relief. Think of the advertising, you get fast-acting relief, 30 days or your money back. You have the click of a mouse. It's a time where we seem to be able to get whatever we want instantly. We live in the age of amazon.com but it's a great deception in a sense, it's very deceptive. We get used to having things right away but "to the Lord a thousand years in thy sight are but yesterday when it's passed." We need to learn to trust in the Lord. Do we trust the Lord with our time? And do we even trust that he might not immediately give us what we want for our own good? We've looked again and again at those New Testament passages, "Count it all joy when you face various trials." Or Hebrews 12, "Whom the Lord loves, he chastens." We need to understand that the Lord takes people to difficult and hard places sometimes for long periods of time to show them his glory.

Moses here is at the back of the desert, it says, and Horeb, that Horeb, Horeb, that means dry, parched, a wasteland. It's one name for Mount Sinai. Sinai is more the whole region, the whole broader area with one focal point of a mountain at the center, but here Horeb, that means parched. It means wasteland. It means dry place. It's clear he's actually even farther on the edge of Midian or even beyond Midian. He must have been ranging his flocks quite far that year. It would have been a hard time, a dry time. You know that the drier it got for shepherds, the further they'd have to go with their flocks, the more they'd have to go up into the mountains and here's Moses, he's way on the edge.

You know, Canaan was where the successful people lived in this time. Mesopotamia where the rivers were. Egypt. Those were the good places of the Middle East along the green and the lush rivers, but here's Moses and he's back at the back of the back of the desert for years and years and years, and he's in a dry and thirsty land. Why would the Lord do this to Moses? Why do many believers struggle with challenges and difficulties

and unanswered prayers? Perhaps some even with weak assurance of faith or doubts? Why does it feel that sometimes the Christian life is a few drops here and a few crumbs here in a wilderness? Well, you can look at Moses and you can see the Lord was preparing him and you can look at your own life and some of the valleys in it and some of the hardships and the sicknesses and the difficulties and realize that the Lord is actually preparing his people for heaven through that and preparing them also for things in this life.

You can even think of the New Testament church. There's a parallel. When we choose elders in the church, 1 Timothy 3:6 says they're "not to be a novice lest lifted up with pride they fall into the condemnation of the devil." Here's Moses, God was making very very sure this man was not a novice. He had to go through trial after trial after trial to prepare him to lead really what would be an obstinate people, an unshepherdable people. So God had to put him through this humbling trial of preparation, down this path Moses would never have chosen for himself. Moses was a revolutionary, we saw. He wanted to just start that revolution, kick things off, get those people out of Egypt, get them over to Israel, but the Lord's plan was to take longer. Moses would learn about the bitter consequences of sin. He'd be acquainted with the reality of a fallen world. He'd be broken and that's not a popular doctrine in our day, but Hebrews 12 makes it very clear these things still happen. The book of James, the book of 1 Peter, they all teach Christians, "Be patient. You're going to go through some hard times, some dry times, some times of trial. Don't think that that means that God has abandoned you or that he doesn't hear you anymore. No, it should cause you to cry out all the more."

Now Moses, we come back to him now, he's guiding his flock and his time has now come. It probably would have felt like a very ordinary day, just bringing that flock through the back of the desert and he sees this strange and this even surprising sight. There's this burning bush. We're told right away the angel of the Lord is in that burning bush but Moses doesn't know that. He's just ranging his flock along and he sees a bush burning. It would have been a thorn bush from the description of a bush, and in that dry region, those bushes, you would have expected to flare up if by some strange chance of reflected sunlight or maybe somebody lighting a fire, a bush was lit on fire, you'd expect it to flare up and burn out in a few moments. It would be dry wood. But Moses notices it's a great sight. There's a hint there of the miraculous. It's burning but it's not burning up and it was meant to get Moses' attention. Moses approaches and he turns aside and God calls to him from that bush. It's the angel of the Lord. It's the messenger of the Lord.

Now this whole scene, a burning bush and a voice coming to Moses out of it, it's what we call in the Old Testament a theophany. A theophany. That just means a revelation of God, a way that God reveals himself. God came to them in visions and in signs and in different ways that taught them about himself. They didn't walk around with a pocket Bible like we do. We might be able to have a pocket Bible or in our day we could have a Bible on our cellphone and we could sit down and we pray and the verses come back to our mind. In our age, that's the way God has given us for guidance, but in those days, God came and he got the attention of men like Abraham and men like Moses with these theophanies, and if you look at the Bible, there's sort of these different stages where God comes in

somewhat different ways and in these last days, he's come and he's spoken to us by his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, but in those days he came with these symbols. It's similar to Abraham seeing that burning pot in that smoking oven, taught something about God.

So we establish this is a revelation of something about God but it's not exactly easy to understand, is it? I can remember as a boy I had some confusion almost about these verses. What in the world does this mean? Why would God come in this way? This seems kind of strange. Why not just send an angel? That seems to be more practical, doesn't it, to us? Just send an angel and bring a message. What does this mean, a burning bush that is not burning? How can we understand it?

Well, it must have been something burned, you could say, into Moses' mind. He must have thought about this many many times. It's not a scene that can be easily understood but it does have sort of a parable type appearance to it. When the Lord Jesus came, he told all those stories and he told them with parables and there's not full agreement on what this sort of parable type picture of a burning bush means in the church, but if we look at the context, we can learn a few things about who God is from this.

First, most important if you look at the context, Moses is learning something here about the holiness of God. That's the first thing we can certainly learn from this fire and this picture. Verse 5, "Don't draw near to this place. Take your sandals off your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground." God is teaching Moses, "I am holy." That much is obvious. Moses turns aside from his way, he draws near to God, he presents himself, he says, "Here I am," and the first thing he's told is, "Don't come too close. Do not draw near." We tell small children around a campfire, "Don't get too close." You have that campfire evening at your home or in your back yard or when you're camping, and when you have little kids around that campfire, you're saying these exact words over and over, aren't you? "Don't get too close. Stand back. Look out. Watch out. Don't run by the campfire. Back off a little." And the burning bush sends that exact kind of message that may seem very basic but be careful how you approach.

Moses could not, perhaps if there was an angel there he could try to bow at that angel's feet or come close to that angel, but when you're faced with a burning bush, you have to think that these scrub bushes in the wilderness, they're not just, you know, this big probably. Most likely they're, you know, a few feet across, 10 feet or so, and 8 feet tall, and Moses is coming up to this fire and the first thing he is told is, "Don't come too close."

Then he's even told, "Take your sandals off for where you're standing is holy ground." Now we take our shoes off to go into a clean place. In Canada, we take our shoes off when we enter a home because so much of the year the ground is dirty and you don't want to mess up inside somebody's home. You notice if you go to the southern states, people don't take their shoes off when they go into a home often, but here we do because we want to keep the home clean. And that's still true, some temples, some churches, mosques, they've clung to this kind of picture, the idea that these, they're false temples, but these places where you meet with God are to be a clean place, a special place, a

different place. "Take off your shoes." That's another picture of you're coming near to the holy God.

Then think later about this exact same mountain, there's a fire on the top of the mountain when God visits at Sinai, and they actually put a fence around the mountain and they tell the people, "Don't touch that mountain. Don't go near to the Lord." It's actually the same picture. Moses is, you see, Moses here, he spends his mini-exodus, his mini-40 years in the wilderness of his own, and then he also has his own version of Sinai before the great version of Sinai and both are teaching ultimately about God's holiness. That's the main message of the burning bush, God is holy. You don't just run up to him. Some people think that's an Old Testament picture that in Christ God is merciful and gracious, anybody always can just run into the Lord's arms for comfort and for hope, and indeed we can approach the Lord by that new and living way, we can come boldly in the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet he's still the same Lord. I can find you many New Testament texts that still communicate this fearful holiness of God, the sense that, yes, indeed he does embrace us in his Son Jesus Christ, there's full and free forgiveness, and yet Hebrews 12:28, "Let us have grace by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear for our God is a consuming fire."

Now that's Hebrews. That's after Jesus came and it's still saying the same picture, to be careful how we approach God. Even when we gather in worship like this, we should be careful how we approach God. Yes, we come in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ but we don't come flippantly, we don't come without any fear or without any responsible level of reverence. We're coming before the Lord who's a holy God, coming with reverence and with godly fear.

There are many reminders of this in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 6, "He's the Lord of lords who alone has immortality dwelling in an unapproachable light whom no one has seen or can see." We need to come in worship with reverence and there's a picture in this burning bush, you don't just come so flippantly, you come with a respect, with a fear of God.

And it continues in the New Testament. You think of John 15, the branches that are cast away, that are thrown into the fire. You think of Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira. They came to the church with lies and they were struck dead. This scene is an Old Testament picture of an eternal truth about God. He is holy. We must come before him with reverence and godly fear and we should be praying each Lord's Day that we'd come with reverence and godly fear.

But then there's more. This is also a scene much like the New Testament, really no different than the New Testament, where the Lord comes with grace and mercy and even kindness and gentleness before his people. He comes down to their level. This fire is a token of that. It's a visit of God who's going to rescue his people.

We can go further with this image and we'll see that in a moment, more of the covenant God coming to visit his people. You can go further with this image, fire actually. This

burning bush when all you read is the burning bush, it's a little bit obscure or abstract it seems, but if you keep reading through Exodus, there's a lot of fire actually in Exodus. There's a pillar of fire that leads them by night. There's a fire that troubles the Egyptians and separates them from Israel. In chapter 19, the Lord descends on Sinai with fire. And it goes on and on. There's the sacrifices of fire. The Lord is showing his people he is holy, he is light, he is truth, he is perfectly clean. And you look at fire, it's still the same. It's life-giving, it's light and it's heat for our homes and yet it can consume in a moment.

So Moses is learning here about the holiness of God and he draws near, he takes off his shoes, and yet he doesn't draw too near. God is not to be trifled with. He is the great I Am and we learn ultimately only in Christ, only in Jesus can we come to God, but that still leaves now with the question, the main point is the holiness of God, but that leaves us with the question: why is this bush not consumed? What's happening here? Well, in the first place it's obviously a supernatural sign to Moses but there's a few different reasons or different views that we could put forward that what this is teaching Moses.

Well, first, it's a picture that does point forward to the Lord Jesus Christ and there are a lot of parallels, especially if you look at what the ancient church believed about this. They believed that it was a picture of Jesus going under the judgment and the wrath of God, the Lord Jesus going on that cross, even going to hell itself, entering the Holy of Holies but in the end he was not consumed. The Lord Jesus was not consumed by the wrath of God.

So even in the picture of this bush, a picture of a part of God's creation not being consumed, there's a picture of God sparing his creation. All the fires of Exodus, this bush, the pillar of fire, Mount Sinai, the sacrifices, they were ultimately fulfilled on the cross of Jesus Christ and he drew near to the Lord God and underwent the wrath of God for our sake and all of these fires in Exodus, they point us to Jesus and they show us that we need Jesus to go under the wrath of God for us, and the call is, "Come to the Lord Jesus. Trust in him."

So there's sort of a prototypical or prototype picture, an early picture, it's not all perfectly clear, but in this first fire there's a picture, we shouldn't say the first fire, there's already an earlier one before Abraham in the smoking pot and the burning furnace there, but here's a picture that points us ultimately to Jesus. But then many also see and I don't think it's wrong to see this, that there's a picture that's profound here, that there's this bit of fallen creation that's not utterly consumed. It's a thorn bush. Remember, that was a picture of the curse in Adam, the thorns and thistles, and even though the flames lick around it, and even though this bush is right in the very presence of God, still it's not consumed and that strikes Moses. He notices there's a great sign there. There's something strange here and there is a certain hope in this, that it's possible to be near to God and yet not be consumed by him. His church at that time was in what God called himself the furnace of affliction, Deuteronomy 4:20, "the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day." And many take this bush to be a symbol of how God would dwell with his people, how he would come into his very creation and even though we've fallen and even though this

world is broken, instead of just utterly consuming it with fire, if anybody knows their sin and knows their heart they will admit, "I deserve to be utterly consumed. I deserve to be in hell. I ought to be cast away, consumed, burned away forever. That's what I deserve." That's what we all deserve. But here this picture is, there is this symbol that God would preserve his people, that he doesn't give them what they deserve and that's the whole theme of Exodus. God doesn't give his people what they deserve. He doesn't consume them. There's even a time where he threatens to and they deserve it completely and yet Moses stands in the way and he still preserves them.

You know, our churches, the Free Reformed churches, if you look on our church website or any of the documents, it's kind of interesting they have a little picture of this scene, Moses standing before the fire, and it says, "And the bush was not consumed." That's the motto of the Free Reformed churches and that's kind of interesting. I've always looked at that and thought that's kind of obscure. Why in the world? But they have taken that and the church historically has taken that to this picture that God preserves feeble branches, he preserves his little church even though he's a perfectly consuming fire, that God is holy and yet he doesn't kill us as we deserve. Because of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, his people are preserved.

And it's interesting, if you go around the world, I'm not sure if there's a connection but there are a number of churches that have this as their motto, as their main sort of verse that they've chosen from the Bible for their churches from different traditions, but most of those churches came out of persecution. For the Free Reformed churches, I don't know if you know this, about 200 years ago they did come out of persecution. Their pastors were thrown in jail and they basically they left, they succeeded or they broke away from a mainstream church and it was a hard time for them. It wasn't such a hard persecution as many have gone through but many churches that have gone through persecution have taken this picture and said what a miracle that God preserves us rather than destroying us.

Well, it's a reminder, it's a picture that only those that trust in the Lord Jesus and what he's done on the cross can approach the Lord God. The true Christian when they come to know the Lord, they'll understand some of this tension that they may draw near to the Lord Jesus Christ and yet he is holy, they don't deserve to be near him and there's sort of this tension, this going back and forth that the Lord is holy and yet he is our Father in Jesus Christ.

When Moses saw this, he was impressed but in verse 6 he's told and it's explained, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look on God." Moses was a believer. In his infancy he would have learned how to pray, he would have learned about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob from his parents. Remember from the last chapter, though, that it's the Lord who visits his people and he visits them because he promised to. God said, after 400 years he said to Abraham, he made that promise to Abraham after 400 years, "I'll visit my people," and Moses now realizes he's meeting with God and he goes from drawing near to hiding his face. He's afraid to look. Suddenly when he realizes that he's before the holy God, he's fearful.

Now this is not an uncommon experience. You think of actually in the Bible you could think of the Apostle Paul, the road to Damascus. He's confronted with God in all his holiness, an unapproachable light, and he's blinded, he's struck blind or it's actually a similar picture to Adam and Eve. When they first sin and they fall into sin, what do they do? They try to hide from God. When a sinner learns something about who God is, what first happens is there's some fear. They want to hide their faces, actually even the angels in Isaiah 6, they cover their faces before the Lord and Moses here, he hides his face. There's some fear.

But then the Lord God comes to him and the Lord reassures him, "I'm here to call you. I'm here to call you to deliver your people." And there's something beautiful happening in this passage. God is taking a weak and a sinful man, Moses, we already know he's a sinner, and God is taking him and he's shaping him and he's molding him to deliver his people. We'll look at that picture, Lord willing, next time more where God is preparing Moses and he's calling Moses, even though Moses feels he doesn't have the right words to say, he's unable to stand, he doesn't know how to lead, he needs help, and yet the Lord has chosen him and the Lord is shaping and the Lord is molding him and the Lord is preparing him to bring a people right before his face.

So ultimately this picture points us again and again to Jesus Christ that we need the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, so the call is, "Come to him and be saved." Amen.

Let us pray.