

Holy Ground and Who God Is (Exodus 2:23-3:9)

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Do you ever wonder if:

- anyone really knows what you're going through?
- anyone notices you?
- your mundane work or life, day in and day out same thing, does it really matter?
- if there's hope in a situation in your life because you don't see God acting and it seems like it's been so long?
- your prayers are hitting the ceiling or don't do anything?
- try to pray but you can't, all you can do is groan?
- Ever feel trapped by life, or enslaved to a sin and you wonder if you can ever really be free from that sin in your life?
- **Ever feel convicted and inadequate before a holy God? I felt that just this weekend**

Turn to Ex 2 where Israel in Egypt is feeling worse and wondering.

The context: Moses is a far- away wandering shepherd,
a lonely mundane job for 40 years.
Israel was enslaved 400 years.

We'll see the answer to those questions and

- that we can hope in the God who notices and helps by His Spirit
- even in our groaning too deep for words
- God truly redeems sinners to be free.
- In the dry desert or in the dark times of suffering
- God is at work and responds to His people's cry.

God isn't mentioned in Ex 2:1-22, maybe He seemed absent, but now listen for 'God' as I read:

2:23 *During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to **God**.²⁴ And **God** heard their groaning, and **God** remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.²⁵ **God** saw the people of Israel—and **God** knew. 3:1* Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of **God**.² And the angel of **the LORD** appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."⁴ When **the LORD** saw that he turned aside to see, **God** called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."⁵ Then **he [God]** said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."⁶ And **he [God]** said, "**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 at **God**.⁷ Then **the LORD** said, "**I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,**⁸ and **I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.**⁹ And

now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to **me**, and **I** have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

'God' by pronoun or personal title 23x after no mention in 20+ verses prior: this is a big point!

LET'S PRAY. Lord God, you are holy and your Word is holy, help me to handle it rightly and reverently with holy fear and faithfulness. Help us to approach you with care knowing you are the God who cares and comes down to save. We call upon you for help in Christ's holy name.

Dennis Prager has written a Jewish commentary on Exodus. He quotes a rabbi who pointed out

- God didn't first appear in fire atop a high mountain or a big tree
- it was an everyday bush in a small and unexpected way
- down to earth on man's level, a God of the mundane and every day.
- he says the burning bush has long been 'the most famous symbol of the Jewish people.'¹
- in modern Israel and synagogues and places Jews still gather all around the world.²

Like the fire burning but not consumed

- Israel hasn't been consumed by the fire of suffering.
- Dt 4:20 says to Israel God '*brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt...*'
- The Bible says to God's people passing through trials '*the flame shall not consume you...I the LORD do not change, therefore you...are not consumed...through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed*'³

When through fiery trials our pathway shall lie, His grace all-sufficient will be our supply
For saints of the Lord the hymn says God's only design is like gold to refine⁴

3,000 years later the suffering persecuted church took the burning bush as their iconic image

- In the 1570s French Protestants had been massacred by Catholic authorities.
- The French Reformer John Calvin had written how the church is often in 'the fires of persecution' but is kept by God 'from being consumed to ashes,' sustained not by its own strength but by the presence of God in the midst.
- In 1583 the Reformed Church of France met and chose as their official seal a burning bush with the Hebrew name Yahweh in the middle and Latin around 'I burn but not consumed.'
- **Even as martyrs burned at the stake the gates of hell couldn't prevail against the church**
- Some 100 years later the burning bush began to be the symbol of the Church of Scotland
- it became part of their visible communion tradition.
- The burning bush is on official crests of the Presbyterian Churches in Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Africa and Asia
- *Reformation Study Bible*, one of my favorite Study Bibles, has a burning bush on cover.
- I read⁵ this emblem links 'a long tradition of Reformed believers who have embraced and found comfort in that image...that God is with His people, and ultimately sustains them, through trial'

I embrace and stand in that tradition and hope we find comfort to sustain us as we see this God.

- No one can see God the Father and live
- but at Pentecost God the Holy Spirit came in tongues like flames of fire
- In Rev 1, Jesus has eyes as flames of fire
- Here the image begins of God as a consuming fire
 - o dangerous to enemies or irreverent worship
 - o but gracious to His beloved people.

You don't play with fire. We need to take serious this God and handle His word with care

Big idea of section: God's servant needs to see who God is and what He calls us to do and be.

1st point: God is holy but graciously speaks – fear Him

Biblical theology context: The Bible starts with

- a lush garden where God is in the midst,
- but sin came into the world and a curse brought thorn bushes, barren deserts, etc.
- Man is sent out from the midst of God's presence in Eden.
- An angel appears with a burning flaming fiery sword to keep sinners from coming near God's holy presence
- That's Gen 3, this is what we read in Ex 3:2 *And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.*
- In v. 5 He tells Moses not to come near because he's on holy ground
 - o God's presence makes it holy.
 - o **Later His presence is in the tabernacle, flames always burning in God's holy place**

R.C. Sproul's book Moses and the Burning Bush says Ex 3 is 'about the holiness of God...It was holy ground because at that point, an intersection between heaven and earth occurred...at the burning bush, and it was earth-shattering...That moment in biblical history when Moses encountered the presence of God in the burning bush is a watershed episode, not only for the life of Moses, or even for the history of Israel, but for the history of the entire world...One of the church's biggest problems is that we don't understand who God is...[as he started Ligonier ministries, someone asked]

"what do you think is the most important thing that Christians need to know in this day"
[Sproul's answer] "Christians need to find out who God is."

[He goes on] I think the greatest weakness in our day is the virtual eclipse of the character of God'⁶

A.W. Tozer wrote decades earlier in Knowledge of the Holy: 'It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God...amounting to a moral calamity...The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils...[and] the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. "Be still..."...The decline of the knowledge of the holy has brought on our troubles.'⁷

God's holy Word says

- without holiness no one can see the Lord, Heb 12:14
- Holy means set apart, utterly distinct, pure
- Moses doesn't come casually or flippantly into God's presence
- He reverently removes his shoes and the end of v. 6 says '*Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.*'
- Acts 7:32 says at the burning bush '*Moses trembled and did not dare to look.*'
- That's holy fear and healthy trembling
- The fear of the Lord is where it starts, for wisdom or worship
- Later God's presence will come in the midst of fire to all God's people and they fear and fall on their faces.
- Heb 12: '*so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear..."*' [end of Heb 12] *let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*'
- Not just OT, Heb 12 is for the NT church's worship!
- We're to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness and to take time to be holy as He is

Imagine an American asking 'what did you get out of worship today?'

- Moses: 'I'm just glad I could get out of worship alive with a holy God!
- No one greeted me, the temperature was hot, no AC
- no donuts, coffee, or kids programs.
- It smelled literally (sheep)
- I didn't get to hear music the way I like or at the volume I prefer
- no one did hymns from the good old days of Egypt (you know, real worship)
- But worship's not about me or for me, it's about a holy God!
- I didn't see a lot with my face down.
- But the speaker was on fire! I heard His word and got out alive!
- If Moses heard how some speak of worship, he might smack us with his staff.
- I fear we don't fear (I know I don't enough, I'm convicted I lack fear in worship)

Really encountering this holy God is life-changing as we hear God speak His very word to us.

- He's holy and He also graciously speaks in v. 4 as He calls out '*Moses, Moses.*'
- The Lord repeats a name to speak grace, often in loving affection to get attention:
 - o **Simon, Simon**, *Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail ...*
 - o **Martha, Martha**, *you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary ...* [listening to the Lord's word]...
 - o **O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...** *I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing...*
 - o **Saul, Saul**, *why are you persecuting me?*

That last one is the closest parallel, out in the desert:

- Saul sees blazing glory and falls on his face.
- That call changed Saul's life and direction to go back to minister
- He would even stand before Caesar, much like Moses called to go back to minister to Israel and stand before Pharaoh.
- At the end of v. 4 Moses says '*Here I am*'
 - o like Isaiah seeing a holy, holy, God, and saying 'Here I am.'
 - o Gen 46:2 '*Jacob, Jacob.*' And he said '*Here I am.*'

- Then God called Jacob for his next mission.
- Sinners don't seek a holy God
 - but God seeks, calls by name
 - and graciously makes us willing.
- He does that with kids, too: '*Samuel, Samuel.*'
 - His reply '*Speak O Lord, for your servant hears.*'

We sang 'speak O Lord' earlier - I pray that's truly our prayer as we come to His holy Word
 holy reverence, true humility, test our thoughts and our attitudes in the radiance of your purity⁸

'Twas grace that taught his heart to fear (*you're on holy ground*)
 then grace his fears relieved (the bush isn't burned up and neither is Moses near God's holiness).

God speaks grace in v. 6: '*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*' Covenant grace

- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were sinful believers, deceivers and schemers
- Abraham and Isaac both lied about their wife (she's my sister)
- Jacob schemed to steal blessing

But God calls them by name and says 'I am their God' and your dad's, and I call you by name.

And in v. 8 God repeats the covenant grace from our scripture reading earlier in Gen 15:

- where God makes this same promise about land
- and people groups He'll deliver them from and to
- God cut the covenant and confirms it by a burning flaming torch passing through

In Ex 3 God is saying verbally but also visually in a flaming bush

- I am the God of Abraham and you, Moses, will be part of this covenant grace

Isaac also had a life-changing encounter like Ex 3

- an unforgettable experience as a young man tied to an altar
- his dad lifts the knife to kill him at God's order.
- But Gen 22 says the same '***angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."***'
- And instead of his son dying, God makes Abraham turn his eyes to a bush
- A ram is caught in this bush
- He sacrifices the ram instead of his son.

Isaac saw no lamb on the way but his dad said '*the Lord will provide*' (grace)

- Then the double name and same phrases as Ex 3
- Ultimately God provides His Son to die as a lamb in our place.

Same pattern in Ex 3, double name, 'here I am,' another big moment in redemptive history

In a few chapters we'll see in Egypt the angel of the Lord kill sons

- unless a perfect lamb is slain and its blood covers the door so the death order passes over
- The only way to be saved by a holy God is Him graciously providing the blood of a perfect lamb that covers us who trust Jesus

– what a marvelous and gracious book and blessing we see in communion and celebrate today!

#1. God is holy but graciously speaks in the gospel of Christ – fear Him and have faith in Him
2nd marvelous reality of God for His servant to see: God is aware and cares and will save

⁷ Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...

- He's aware and acts
- He cares and condescends
- He comes down to our level, a God of the details
- He's not blind to our plight or deaf to our cry.

*Ps 34: The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry...for help, the LORD hears and **delivers them out of all their troubles**. The LORD is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the **afflictions** of the righteous, but the LORD **delivers him out of them all...he delivered me from all my fears** (v. 15-19, 4).*

*Ex 3:9 And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also **seen the oppression** ...*

Remember the theologian Bette Midler? (God is watching us from _____)?

- No, God sees us up close and personal.
- God isn't like an earthly ruler or leader delegating to lower-level staff little concerns
- or sitting in a distant office making decisions about people he doesn't see or visit.
- God doesn't see affliction or oppression from the outside
 - o He sees from the inside better than we can.
 - o **If His eye is on the sparrow, I can know He watches me with even greater care**

End of v. 7: *I know their sufferings*. Repeats 2:25 God **saw** the people of Israel—and God **knew**.

He doesn't just know about, He knows intimately and affectionately as a husband knows a wife.

Other translations of *knew*: 'God understood,' or 'took notice,' or 'was concerned about them.'

Application: when you see someone suffer do you reflect God to them?

- do you let them know your concern and prayers for them?
- Just put your arm around and say 'I know.'
- Maybe not fully, but I see you, I'm aware and care for you.'
- Who do you need to let know that you know?
- Who's someone struggling you can reach out to?

What if you're struggling or suffering? Reach out for help

- Ex 2:23 says in the middle of the verse they '*cried out for help*.'
- It was a '*cry for rescue*' that came up to God, and v. 24 says '*God heard*.'
- He listens to our sighs and cries and what we can't even verbalize.
- He hears groaning too deep for words if we can't pray.
- He hears the heart cry, so pour out your heart.

- Cast all your cares on Him because He cares for you, 1 Pet 5:7

It's not like when you're on your phone, your ears are working but you're not hearing.

- Or you have your focus somewhere else so you can tune out
 - o I'm good at that, not good for my wife).
 - o It's terrible how forgetful I can be.
 - o I'm incredibly prone to zone out, but PTL God never does!

Ex 2:24 says God truly heard *'and **God remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.'* That's how the first page of the gospel starts, Lk 1 says Jesus came and His forerunner *'to **remember his holy covenant...to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him...saved from our enemies'*** (v. 71-74).

- God never mentally forgets
- '*remember*' means He's focusing His attention and moving to action

That gospel language of being delivered from the hand of enemies is from Ex 2. Look at 2:17: *The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and **saved** them, and watered their flock. When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come home so soon today?" They said, "An Egyptian **delivered us from the hand of the shepherds...***

- At this point Moses still looked like and walked like an Egyptian
- They say he *'delivered us out of the hand,'* that's the same phrase in Ex 3:8 where God as Savior says *'I have come down to **deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...***
- Zipporah and her sisters think Moses is an Egyptian delivering them out of the hand of enemies, but God will deliver Israel out from the hand of Egyptians through Moses.
- Ex 2:17 says *'Moses saved them,'* Ex 14:30 says *'the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians'* (same verb, only elsewhere used of God).

What happens at this well is a small preview of salvation at the water of the Red Sea

- God prepares the one who will deliver God's children and the one Moses marries who delivers His children
- Jacob also met a woman at a well who became his bride
- Abraham wanted to get a son for Isaac to marry, and again it's a woman at the well who became Isaac's bride.
- That's a pattern linking the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with Moses in Ex 2 where he also meets a woman at a well who became his bride.
- But that's not all! Another life-changer encounter: Jesus comes to Samaria where Jesus meets who? A woman at the well. Jn 4 even calls it *Jacob's well*, connecting the stories.
- She knew of Messiah, believed in Him and so became the bride of Christ

It's amazing how the OT and NT fit together this one story of the drama of redemption

- This all prefigures or foreshadows the coming Savior
 - o who delivers us from slavery to sin and the hand of Satan
- Moses is a shepherd at the start of Ex 3 but Jesus is the Good Shepherd in Jn 10
 - o who calls us by name and saves eternally in His hand

- He came that we might have life, and more abundantly, by laying down His life for His sheep
- He's the Great Shepherd brought up from the dead by the eternal covenant.
- But you have to cry out for help
- cry for rescue from the wrath to come
 - 'Lord have mercy on me the sinner, remember me in your kingdom.'
 - Fall on your face before God's holiness
 - trust the gracious work of Jesus dying as a substitute lamb.
 - **He was delivered over to be crucified to die and rise to deliver us from sin**

Rev 2: *The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire... 'I know your works... I know where you dwell... I know your tribulation...' Hebrews says Jesus knows experientially*

- temptations so He can come to our aid in temptation and be merciful
- He knows with sympathy our weaknesses as He was tempted like us
- He knows how to give us grace in time of need.⁹

So don't think of this burning bush story without thinking of the beautiful Savior it points us to

- Isa 63 says of Messiah: *'In all their affliction, he was afflicted... he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people'* (v. 9, 11)
- Isa 53 says this Man of Sorrows is familiar with suffering, or well acquainted with grief
- He was oppressed but opened not His mouth
- He surely sees and is intimately acquainted with all our ways
- He hears our cries and He answers
- He remembers His covenant and calls us to communion in remembrance of Him
 - the cup for the New Covenant in His blood
 - and the bread for His perfect holy life given to save and sanctify us

¹ Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Exodus*, 32.

² Tom Constable, *Expository Notes*, 3.2.

³ Isaiah 43:2, Malachi 3:6, Lamentations 3:22 NKJV.

⁴ "How Firm a Foundation."

⁵ This paragraph and the prior paragraph adapted from <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/symbol-burning-bush-church-history>

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Moses and the Burning Bush* (Ligonier, 2018), 2, 9, 58-59.

⁷ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (HarperOne, 1961), 1-5.

⁸ Getty Music, "Speak O Lord."

⁹ Hebrews 2:17-28, 4:14-16.