

## **Studies in Exodus No. 5**

**Exodus 4:1-17**

**March 20, 2005**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

### **Review**

We are still in the midst of the conversation that Moses had with the Lord at the burning bush. We have so far considered the encounter between Moses and the Lord as a paradigm of all such encounters between believers and the Lord. We noted how typical this encounter was of a number of other such encounters between an individual and the Lord recorded for us in Holy Scripture. There is a pattern disclosed here. Then we considered the significance of the Lord's name as it was revealed to Moses. We pointed out how in the name as the Lord explains it, the emphasis falls on the active presence of God. He is the God who *is* and who *is present* to help his people; to know them, to care for them, and to deliver them. The conversation now continues.

### **Text Comment**

- v.1 Moses' question is sensible and obvious enough. After all, he left Egypt a fugitive under sentence of death and he had been away a long time. Why would the Israelites risk a confrontation with the Egyptian government on his say so? Why should they believe his report about meeting with the Lord in the desert? That there was in this question some spirit of refusal as well will become more evident as we read on.
- v.2 The Lord acknowledges the reasonableness of Moses' question and so will provide him three demonstrations of the authority God has granted him on Israel's behalf. The first is the staff that turns into a snake; the second his hand becoming leprous in one moment and then clean again in another; the third is water from the Nile turning to blood. The question: "what is that in your hand?" draws our attention to the fact that what Moses is holding is an ordinary stick.
- v.3 It is no doubt important that snakes were worshipped in Egypt. Egyptian enchanters could charm snakes and make them motionless and then change them back into their normal vitality, but what Moses does is much more than that. [Cassuto, 46]
- v.4 The Lord told Moses to take the snake by the tail. Ordinarily snakes were held below the head to keep them from biting. The tail is the most dangerous place to grab a venomous snake. Moses had to trust the Lord that obedience would not lead to a fatal bite.
- v.5 The point is that Moses will do this same thing again before the Israelites, a point made explicit in v. 8. That is, they will not have to believe Moses' report of the staff turning into a snake; they will see it happen with their own eyes. And the miracle will prove to them that Moses has received authority from God.

- v.8 The same thing is true of the miracle of the leprous hand. It also was significant for that time and place. Leprosy was common in Egypt and was regarded, and rightly, as an incurable disease. The cure of leprosy in Jesus' time was calculated to leave a deep impression as it was understood that to cure a leper, as one rabbi once put it, was as impossible as raising someone from the dead. Moses would be able to do the same thing with the Israelites as witnesses.
- v.9 Of course, this third sign, which could only be performed in Egypt, as events unfold, becomes the first of the ten plagues. Remember, the Nile was not only an Egyptian god but the source of the country's life and prosperity. [Alter, 326] Of the three mentioned here, this one apparently was never used merely to persuade the Israelites of his authority.

The use of the concept of "sign" (תִּיּוֹט) remember is prominent in John's Gospel. The Lord's identity as the Messiah and the Son of God was authenticated by "signs," seven of which John records in the body of his Gospel. Remember, the first of those signs was the changing of water into wine at Cana. Later, in Acts 2, in his sermon delivered on the Day of Pentecost, Peter reminds the people that the Lord Jesus was "accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs." That is the great function of miracles in the Bible, to accredit those who are exercising a God-given authority in the world. Moses' miracles and Jesus' miracles and Paul's miracles are for the same purpose and reveal the same thing.

As you remember, miracles are not evenly spread throughout the biblical history. Most devout people who lived during the time covered by biblical history never saw a miracle. Rather, these wonders gather around a few prominent figures in the history of salvation, figures who act on God's behalf, but especially who speak on God's behalf. So we have miracles with Moses, the giver of the Law. We have miracles with Elijah and Elisha at the headwaters of the prophetic movement of Israel. And we have miracles with Jesus and his apostles. Otherwise we have very few and, in most cases, no miracles at all. Miracles are not to amuse; they are not even for the blessing of the people *per se*, though many were healed, for example, by Jesus and the apostles. Jesus made a point of saying this. He pointed out to his disciples on one occasion that there were plenty of Israelite widows who needed help and Elijah helped none of them. Rather he helped a Syro-Phoenician woman in need. Miracles accredit the man and what he says and does on God's behalf. Miracles prove to us, at those points where such proof was most important, that in the words and deeds of this man we are dealing with God himself! In a day when some people in the church claim to perform miracles it is very important for Christians to be sober-minded and biblical in their evaluation of such claims.

It is also true that biblical miracles are noteworthy for their self-authenticating character. No one ever had to wonder whether a miracle had occurred. The Egyptians didn't when Moses performed his; the Pharisees never did when Jesus performed his. It is in the nature of a sign that it should be clear, convincing, and incontrovertible. Biblical miracles always were. Even the enemies of the faith did not and could not deny that supernatural power had been exercised before them. What pass for miracles today do not have this self-authentication. The people who claim to perform them cannot convince

even most of the believing church that a miracle has occurred, much less the unbelieving world.

I have told you before; I tell you again. You needn't worry about missing out on the miraculous. When it occurs in the world, if it occurs, you will know it because everyone will know it. When God unleashes his power before the eyes of men *everyone knows it*. You will read what happened on the front page of the *New York Times* even if the miracle produces no more faith in the editors of the paper than it did in the hearts and minds of the Egyptian court or the Sadducees and Pharisees who crucified Jesus knowing full well what miracles Jesus had performed. Moses was given *signs* to perform. The are "proving-acts." [Durham, 46] They gave him an undeniable authority. The ten plagues will also be called "signs" and demonstrate that it is the Lord who is at work through his agent. In any case, it will be clear that it is not Moses who is doing, causing these remarkable things to happen, but God at work through Moses.

- v.10 Now Moses' resistance, his unhappiness with the assignment he has been given comes into the open. One would think that being able to turn a staff into a snake at will would be enough to compensate for a lack of oratorical power. Moses even has the audacity to claim that, despite the encounter with the Lord presently underway, he is as inept a speaker as ever. What he says, literally, is that he is "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." That has led some commentators to wonder whether Moses had an actual speech impediment and was not simply saying that he was unaccustomed to and untrained in public speaking. Of course, as the subsequent narrative will make clear, Moses, once doing the Lord's will in faith, seems capable of very eloquent speaking. Perhaps all he means is that he has been in Midian a long time; his Egyptian is rusty and his court etiquette rustier still. [Ellison, 24]
- v.11 The point is that the maker of the mouth and tongue, the creator of the power of speech has called you to this mission. Obviously I am not going to be stymied by your lack of eloquence. It was *I*, the maker of speech, who decided to call *you*.
- v.12 The issue is not Moses' eloquence but the Lord's presence! What the Lord literally says is not "I will help you speak," but "I am with your mouth" or "I will be your mouth." He already said in 3:12, "I am with you." He already introduced himself as "I am who I am." And now he says "I AM with your mouth." In v. 15 the Lord says the same thing again: "I am with your mouth and I am with Aaron's mouth." This language of "I am" ties the narrative together and lays further stress on the message of the Lord's name: "I am who I am." There is through this entire section an emphatic assertion of the Lord's presence. [Durham, 50]
- v.13 Moses has no more arguments, but he still does not want to say, "Here am I, send me."
- v.14 The Lord is fed up, disgusted with Moses' hesitancy in the teeth of all the encouragement he has given him. He makes further provision to bolster Moses' wilting faith, but the discussion is over. The Lord may be angered by Moses' cowardice, but he is not unprepared for it. Aaron is on his way to meet Moses and to help him.

- v.16 The dramatic way of describing the communication relay from God, to Moses, to Aaron, underscores the fact that what Aaron will speak will be God's Word.
- v.17 Aaron will help, but Moses is still *the man*. The instructions have been given to *him* and he must obey them.

Now there is something very familiar about this episode. In a number of other like incidents reported in Holy Scripture someone whom God calls to act and speak for him expresses doubt about his ability to do so. We have that with Gideon in Judges 6, with Saul in 1 Sam. 10, with Solomon in 1 Kgs. 3, with Isaiah in Isa. 6 and with Jeremiah in Jer. 1. Not all are as persistent in their resistance as Moses was here. Some accept their summons very readily while, nevertheless, expressing their concern about their ability to be effective in the work to which God has called them. The Apostle Paul, you remember, speaks at some length to the same question in 2 Corinthians. He admits that as a public speaker he comes off a poor second to some of the false teachers who had infiltrated the church in Corinth. What is more, there is the problem of his thorn in the flesh, whatever it was (some have actually thought it was a speech impediment), that bedeviled his life and work. But the Lord said to Paul what he said to Moses long before: "My grace is sufficient for you" and "My power will be made perfect in your weakness." And with his characteristic enthusiasm for a lesson learned, Paul goes on to say that he would rejoice in his weaknesses because, having been called by the Lord, having been issued a divine summons to do the Lord's work, the weaker he is the more of God's power he will wield. Or, as he put it, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

The Bible does not have so many lessons, but its important lessons it tends to repeat over and over again. And so it should not surprise us to find in Paul's life the same lesson that we find in Moses' – that Christian service must be offered not in our own strength but in the strength that the Lord provides.

The fact is, there isn't a thing that God asks you to do that you are capable of doing by yourself. You can't keep his commandments by yourself, you can't put your sin to death by yourself, you can't serve him faithfully by yourself, you can't even give him your love and worship by yourself. But, of course, it is one thing to know that in principle, it is another thing altogether to live your daily life in the active exercise of that principle, remembering it, believing it, and putting it into practice by looking to the Lord for the strength to do what he has commanded and to answer the call he has issued to you.

As we have often pointed out, the lessons of ordinary Christian living are frequently taught in and through the experience of the great men of biblical history. In regard to their importance in the history of salvation they are not like us. But in regard to the spiritual principles of the life of faith, they are the same as us. But writ large on the canvas of a great life those principles are easier to see and the lessons easier to draw. For example, obviously Moses could not do miracles by himself. He could not change a staff into a snake or the water of the Nile into blood. The lesson in such a case is larger than life. Of course, Moses also illustrates the issues that are encountered in a more mundane life like yours or mine. He knew he wasn't a particularly effective speaker – certainly nothing like his brother Aaron, who was captain of the debate team

and once won the All-Egypt Oratorical Contest – and knew he would stumble over his words when he had to face down the Egyptian court with the outrageous message God had given him to deliver. It was bad enough to have to tell the Pharaoh that the Israelites were leaving whether he liked it or not; it was far worse to have to stammer the message out and look and sound like a goofball when he did it. He knew they were going to laugh at him. He knew they wouldn't take him seriously. Now, if he could speak like Charlton Heston, that might be a different story!

And so with Paul. His weaknesses were of your type and mine. He wasn't particularly gifted in the very field in which he was being asked to perform. As a preacher he knew he wasn't as riveting as these other fellows, knew that he couldn't make the crowd hang on his every word like they could. But he also knew that God in and with his unimpressive sermon was infinitely more powerful than even the greatest human eloquence by itself. And history is full to the brim of the demonstration of this fact.

I read just the other day of an Anglican bishop of the early-middle 19<sup>th</sup> century who preached as little as he could. He knew he was a miserable speaker. A prominent historian of the period described it this way:

“...he could rarely make a point with decision, his delivery was not only dull but embarrassing, his critics said that he drived. He perpetually lost the right words and visibly groped for the wrong, contrived to make a long speech sound interminable, and threw his hearers into a nervous fever. Making a speech at a girls' school, he could not think how to address the girls. ‘My dear young friends – my dear girls – my dear young catechumens – my dear Christian friends – my dear young female women.’ [Owen Chadwick on a Bishop Howley in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, i, 31]

Well, we are all that dear Bishop in one way or another: in loving our wives if we are husbands, in respecting our husbands if we are wives, in being faithful nurturers of and examples to our children if we are parents, in being obedient to our parents if we are children, in being faithful witnesses to the unsaved, in being genuinely kind to others, generous to the needy, sympathetic to the suffering, in being pure, self-controlled, honest, content with what God has given us, submissive to his will. In these ways and others we drivel like the Bishop and stammer out a speech so foolish that we make ourselves look ridiculous in the process. But, and here is the great lesson and the great encouragement of our text and so many others like it in the Bible, including and especially 2 Cor. 12, that stammering, if God is in it, is powerful to sway even the most stubborn and resistant hearts, or most stubborn resistance *in our own* hearts.

The best example of this of which I am aware comes from the Great Awakening and, especially, the outbreak of that great revival in Scotland, which occurred in the town of Cambuslang. The pastor of the parish church there was one William McCulloch, whose outstanding public quality was his lack of natural gifts as a speaker. McCulloch as a preacher made such a poor impression on pulpit committees that it took him nine years to land his first charge after graduating from seminary. Nobody wanted him for their preacher. His own son says of his father, “He was not eloquent.” In fact, he was so lacking in eloquence that in the town he came to be known as “the ale preacher,” because when he got up to speak the men of the congregation left for the pubs. But it was upon William McCulloch's poorly composed and still more poorly delivered sermons

that the Spirit of God fell in 1742 and through those sermons changed the face of Christianity in the English speaking world. What is that but McCulloch being heavy in mouth and heavy in tongue but the Lord, the living and present God, being present with McCulloch's mouth. And when God takes up words and makes them his own, then they are a hammer that shatters rock. It is reported that upwards of 3000 people professed faith for the first time as a result of the revival in Cambuslang. That represents a huge number for what was in effect a Scottish village. It represents a large percentage of the local population – as if tens of thousands became Christians at once in Tacoma.

No one said of John Wesley, McCulloch's contemporary, that he was not eloquent. He was by the standards of the time. But have you ever tried to wade through a Wesley sermon. I challenge you to do it and keep your attention all the way through. If you are having trouble sleeping, just take a volume of Wesley's sermons off the shelf and begin to read and, I guarantee, you'll be fast asleep in no time. And yet, it is the report of all history of that period, that those sermons electrified enormous congregations for years on end and changed the hearts of vast multitudes of men and women. What is that but the Lord being with Wesley's mouth.

Now you are not all preachers and so the lesson for you does not concern the preaching of a sermon. You are not called upon to declare a revolutionary message to an Egyptian king. You are not called upon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, as Gideon; to lead Israel as Saul or Solomon; to be God's prophet as Isaiah or Jeremiah; or to be the founder of Gentile Christianity as the Apostle Paul. But the lesson is the same for you as it was for them. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." We all tend to dodge that bullet by imagining that the things Paul is talking about in Phil. 4 are not the things that we have been called to do, or, at least, are not the things that we are struggling to do at that moment. Paul must be speaking of something else.

But he is not. In making that amazing statement he was seeking to convince the Philippians that it was as true of them – as believers in Christ – as it was true of him as an apostle of the Lord. And it remains as true today as it was in apostolic times. Every Christian can do anything and everything that God summons him to do. Every Christian can be that brave, that holy, that kindly, that hard-working, that quiet and submissive, that calm and accepting, *if only he will believe what God has said*, if only he will believe the promise that God has made: "I will be with you." I will be with your mouth, with your hand, with your feet as you go wherever I send you.

Do you believe that? Moses was hard put to believe it. He thought of the court as he remembered it. He thought of what those high-faluting people would think of him when he came in and how they would chuckle at his accent and his funny message about the Israelites leaving Egypt. Moses was even hard put to believe what God was telling him and promising him *after he had turned his staff into a snake, after he had changed his hand from healthy to leprous and back again*. Still the lethargy of his spirit, the grip of memory, of the routine of everyday experience kept hold of his mind and heart.

So, perhaps it is not so terrible a thing for you to admit this to yourself, as I must admit it to myself – that I struggle to believe that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, that

the Lord will be with me to accomplish what he has called me to do, that when I am weakest – that is, in the realization of my own strength – I am strongest – that is in the realization of God’s power available to me.

The object of a preacher like myself in preaching, and I hope and believe the object of a congregation like yourselves in hearing, is not that we should discuss some spiritual or theological proposition together or give attention to some theory of the Christian life. We are out to bring the Word of God, the living Word of the living God, to bear on our thinking, and especially on our will. It is for us who hear the Word of God, even this long ago word of God to Moses, not only to try to understand it, to penetrate its meaning, but to *believe* it and, believing, to act on it, at this moment and in coming days.

And how does one *act on* this exchange between Moses and the Lord at the burning bush? Well, one remembers how typical it is, how universal its lesson for every believer. One realizes that he or she is being spoken to directly and challenged in precisely this matter of living in the active confidence of God’s presence with him, with her and, in that confidence, in the expectation of attempting and of succeeding at whatever God is calling us to do.

What is it in your life? You know what it is every Christian life: obedience, faithful gospel service, witness to others, kindness and charity, purity and holiness of life. But you also know in what particular forms that divine summons takes in your life: where the rubber of God’s calling and summons meets the road of your own particular situation and circumstance. You know as no one else but God knows.

You also know how much you have been like Moses and how often, you have also been seeking to put off the Lord’s summons, to evade his call, to live on without having to do this thing that God requires of you. And here God speaks to you and says, “Enough of this. I will be with you and that is all you need to know. Now obey. Do what I have called you to do. And do it looking up all the while, remembering that no one ever said and I certainly never suggested that you could do this by yourself. I wouldn’t have sent you on the errand if I weren’t going to go with you myself to enable you and to bless your efforts.”

I am as sure of this as I am that I am standing here that the main reason there is not more of the ten plagues and the conquest of Egypt and the exodus and the parting of the waters of the Reed Sea in your life and in mine is because we do not act boldly in the confidence that God is with our mouth, our hand, and our feet. Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God. The one is as important as the other. The power of God is not given whether or not we think of it or look for it or care to have it or pray for it. It comes from God to those who believe it is there and who wish to see it displayed in their lives just as God has said.