

The Burning Bush



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 18:3, 4; Exod. 3:1–22; Gen. 22:11, 15–18; Exod. 6:3; Joel 2:32; Exod. 4:1–31; Gen. 17:10, 11.*

Memory Text: “And the LORD said: ‘I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey’ ” (*Exodus 3:7, 8, NKJV*).

God's call to us will often change the direction of our lives. However, if we follow that call, then we discover that God's path is always the best route for us. However, sometimes—at first—it isn't easy to accept God's call.

Such is the case for Moses and his call by God, which specifically began at the encounter with the Lord at the burning bush. Although Moses may or may not have known about the laws of combustion, he knew that what he was seeing was a miracle, and it certainly caught his attention. No question, the Lord was calling him to a specific task. The issue was: Would he answer the call, regardless of the radical new change in his life that this call would bring? At first, he was not very receptive to it.

You may recall instances when you had specific goals, but God redirected those plans. It is true that we can be useful to God in many ways, but following God's call in our lives, and doing what He leads us to do, is surely the path to the most satisfying existence. It might not always be easy, and it wasn't easy for Moses, but how foolish to go our own way when God is calling us in another direction.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 12.

The Burning Bush

After Moses fled to Midian, he had a relatively easy life. He married, had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (*Exod. 18:3, 4*), and was part of the extended family of Jethro, his father-in-law and a priest in Midian. He spent 40 relaxed years being a shepherd, like David (*2 Sam. 7:8*), enjoying God's presence, especially as revealed in nature.

Yet, this time was not simply for Moses to smell the flowers (or perhaps, in this case, the desert cactus?). These years of walking with the Lord changed him and prepared him for a leadership role. God also used Moses in this quiet wilderness to write, under divine inspiration, two of the oldest biblical books: Job and Genesis (see Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 251; Francis D. Nichol, et al., eds., *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140). Moses also received from God crucial insights about the great controversy, the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the patriarchs, and, most important, the plan of salvation. Thus, Moses was instrumental in passing on to all humanity the true knowledge of the living God, our Creator and Sustainer, and knowledge about what God is doing in view of the sin that has wreaked havoc on this planet. Biblical and salvation history make little sense apart from the crucial foundation that, under inspiration, Moses gave us, especially in the book of Genesis.

Read Exodus 3:1–6. What significance can be found in the fact that the Lord introduced Himself to Moses as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?

Moses saw that the burning bush was not being consumed by the fire, and thus he knew that he was seeing a miracle and that something dramatic and important must be taking place right before him. As he moved closer, the Lord told him to take his shoes off as a sign of deep respect because God's presence made the place holy.

The Lord presented Himself to Moses as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (*Exod. 3:6*). The Lord had promised these patriarchs that their descendants would inherit Canaan, a promise Moses surely knew about. Thus, even before saying it, God was already opening the way for Moses to know what was coming and what crucial role he was to play.

Moses needed 80 years before God deemed him ready for his task. What might this truth teach us about patience?

The Angel of the Lord

“The angel of the LORD” appeared to Moses in flames of fire “from within a bush” (*Exod. 3:2, NIV*). It was the Lord Jesus Himself speaking to Moses “from within the bush” (*Exod. 3:4, NIV*).

Do not be confused with the title “angel of the LORD” as a depiction of Jesus Christ. The term *angel* itself simply means “messenger” (Hebrew *mal’akh*), and it always depends on the context whether this angel is to be interpreted as human or divine (*see Mal. 3:1*). There are many instances in the Bible where “the angel of the LORD” refers to the divine person (study, for example, *Gen. 22:11, 15–18; Gen. 31:3, 11, 13; Judg. 2:1, 2; Judg. 6:11–22; Zech. 3:1, 2*). This angel of the Lord not only speaks in the name of the Lord, but He is the Lord Himself. Jesus is God’s messenger to communicate the Father’s Word to us.

Read Exodus 3:7–12. How did God explain to Moses why He wanted to intervene on behalf of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt?

The suffering of God’s people in Egypt is colorfully described as a groaning and a deep cry for help. God heard their cry and was concerned (*Exod. 2:23–25*). He called them “my people” (*Exod. 3:7*). That is, even before Sinai and the ratifying of the covenant, they were His people, and He would cause them to dwell and prosper (if they would obey) in the land of Canaan, as He had promised their fathers.

God said to Moses that He was sending him to Pharaoh for a specific task: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (*Exod. 3:10, NIV*). Again, God calls them “my people.”

What a task God presented to His servant! Moses, therefore, responded with a question: “Who am I?” That is, grasping the significance of what is going to happen and what his role is going to be in all this, Moses wonders why someone like himself would be chosen. Here, early on, we have an indication of his character, his humility, and his sense that he is unworthy of what he is being called to do.

Why is humility, and a sense of our own “unworthiness,” so important for anyone who seeks to follow the Lord and do anything for Him?

The Name of the Lord

Read Exodus 3:13–22. Why did Moses want to know God’s name, and what is the significance of His name?

God presents Himself to Moses as “*’ehelah ’asher ’ehelah*,” which literally means “I will be who I will be,” or “I am who I am.” In Exodus 3:12, God uses the same verb *’ehelah* as in verse 14, when He states to Moses, “I will be” (with you). It means that God is eternal. He is the transcendent God, as well as the immanent God, and He dwells with those “who are contrite and humble in spirit” (*Isa. 57:15, NRSV*).

The proper name of God, “Yahweh” (translated in English Bibles usually as “the LORD”), was known to God’s people from the beginning, even if they didn’t know its deeper meaning. Moses also knew the name Yahweh, but, like others, he did not know the real meaning. His question, “What is your name?” is a query about that deeper meaning.

A helpful hint is in Exodus 6:3, where God stated: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them” (*Exod. 6:3, NIV*). It does not signify that Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the patriarchs did not know the name “Yahweh” (*see Gen. 2:4, 9; Gen. 4:1, 26; Gen. 7:5; Gen. 15:6–8; etc.*). It means, instead, that they did not know its deeper meaning.

His name, Yahweh, points to the fact that He is the personal God, the God of His people, the God of the covenant. He is a close, intimate God who intervenes in human affairs. The Almighty God (*Gen. 17:1*) is the God who miraculously intervened by His power. But Yahweh is a God who demonstrates His moral power by love and care. He is the same God as Elohim (“mighty, strong, transcendent God,” the “God of all people,” “the Ruler of the universe,” “the Creator of everything”), but different aspects of His relationship to humanity are revealed by the name Yahweh itself.

Knowing the name or calling on God’s name is not something magical. It is about a proclamation of His name, which means teaching others the truth concerning this God and the salvation that He offers to all who come in faith. As Joel says: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (*Joel 2:32, NIV*).

In what ways in your own life have you experienced the closeness and intimacy with Yahweh that He seeks to have with all who are surrendered to Him?

Four Excuses

Read Exodus 4:1–17. What set of signs did God give to Moses to perform in order to strengthen his position as God’s messenger?

Moses again tried to excuse himself from the task God asked of him (*see* *Exod. 3:11*). He did not want to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. After all, he had already failed when he previously tried, on his own, to help the Hebrews. Also, his own people didn’t believe in or accept him as their leader. That’s why he formulated a third objection: “ ‘What if they do not believe me or listen to me?’ ” (*Exod. 4:1, NIV*). This was not a question to learn something new; it was an attempt to say no to the responsibility that God asked him to undertake.

Two miraculous signs are given to Moses to perform before the elders of Israel and, later, before Pharaoh: (1) his staff turning into a snake and then back into a staff, and (2) his hand becoming leprous but then instantly healed. Both miracles should convince the elders that God is at work for them. But if not, the third miracle, that of turning water into blood, was added (*Exod. 4:8, 9*).

Although God gave Moses these mighty wonders, he still expresses another excuse, the fourth: he is not a good speaker.

Read Exodus 4:10–18. How does the Lord respond to Moses, and what lessons can we take from that for ourselves, in whatever situation we believe God calls us to?

This set of four excuses shows Moses’ reluctance to follow God’s call. With “reasonable” objections, he masks his unwillingness to go. The first three excuses are in the form of questions: (1) Who am I? (2) Who are You? and (3) What if they do not believe me? And the fourth objection is (4) the statement: “I am not eloquent.” God reacted to all of them and brought a powerful solution. To these excuses God presents many uplifting promises.

Then Moses delivers his fifth and final plea and directly asks: “ ‘O my Lord, please send someone else’ ” (*Exod. 4:13, NRSV*). In response, God tells him that He is already sending his brother, Aaron, to meet him for support. Finally, Moses silently concedes and asks Jethro for his blessing before departing for Egypt.

The Circumcision

Read Exodus 4:18–31. How do we understand this strange story, and what lesson can we take from it?

Bible students are shocked when they read that, after Moses obeyed the Lord and started his journey back to Egypt, the Lord “was about to kill him” (*Exod. 4:24, NIV*). From the context of the story, it is evident that the issue was circumcision. His youngest son was not circumcised, as the Abrahamic covenant demanded (*Gen. 17:10, 11*).

Moses, as the leader of God’s people, needed to show his perfect submission and obedience to God, in order to be qualified to lead other people to be obedient. He had to be a model of that total surrender to God. His wife, Zipporah, was a woman of action and circumcised her son in order to save the life of her husband. She touched Moses with the “bloody foreskin,” and this blood represents atonement, life, and the sealing of the covenant. The fact that it was done so quickly added to the drama of the situation.

An important lesson can be learned from this episode: never fail to do what we know is right.

“On the way from Midian, Moses received a startling and terrible warning of the Lord’s displeasure. An angel appeared to him in a threatening manner, as if he would immediately destroy him. No explanation was given; but Moses remembered that he had disregarded one of God’s requirements . . . he had neglected to perform the rite of circumcision upon their youngest son. He had failed to comply with the condition by which his child could be entitled to the blessings of God’s covenant with Israel; and such a neglect on the part of their chosen leader could not but lessen the force of the divine precepts upon the people. Zipporah, fearing that her husband would be slain, performed the rite herself, and the angel then permitted Moses to pursue his journey. In his mission to Pharaoh, Moses was to be placed in a position of great peril; his life could be preserved only through the protection of holy angels. But while living in neglect of a known duty, he would not be secure; for he could not be shielded by the angels of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 255, 256.

What should this story say to you if you are indeed guilty of neglecting what you know you should be doing? What changes do you need to make, even right now?

FurtherThought: Read Ellen G. White, “Moses,” pp. 251–256, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

The dramatic burning bush call was probably the most transformative experience in Moses’ life. All other high points in his life depended on his positive, obedient response to God’s commissioning him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and to the Promised Land.

Sure, we know now how it all turned out. But put yourself in Moses’ place at the time of the burning bush. He had fled from Egypt to save his life. A new generation of Hebrews had come on the scene over the 40 years, many of whom probably knew little about him, or maybe even what they heard about him was wrong, filtered through stories that over time get distorted. *And yet now, he was called by God to lead this same people away from a powerful nation?* No wonder he was reluctant at first!

Yes, it was an extremely demanding task, but imagine what he would have missed if he had given a final no to God. He might have just disappeared into history instead of—through the power of God working in him—literally making history and becoming one of the greatest and most influential people, not just in the Bible but in the world itself.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In the quiet years spent in the desert, Moses did what God called him to do: he was a family man, took care of sheep, and wrote two biblical books under God’s inspiration before he was called to be a great leader of God’s people. What does Moses’ experience teach us about our duties in life?
- ② One could argue that, on the surface, Moses’ excuses were, in and of themselves, pretty reasonable, were they not? *Why should the people believe me? Who am I to begin with? I can’t speak well.* What should this story tell us about how to learn to trust that God can enable us to do what He calls us to do?
- ③ Dwell more on the point made in Sunday’s study about Moses’ authorship of the book of Genesis and how important that work is to understanding sacred history and the plan of salvation. Why must we fight against every attempt (and there are many) to weaken the authority of the book, especially by denying the historicity of, particularly, the first 11 chapters?

A Transformed Mind

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Mitch, a tough gang member, got into a brawl with several other Native Americans in the US state of Washington. He suffered a significant head injury, and doctors said he would never work again.

Then his younger brother, Stephan, invited him to the All Nations Center Adventist Church in Wapato, Washington. Stephan worshiped every Sabbath at the church with their mother and sister.

Mitch didn't want to go, and he went unwillingly to the church on Sabbath. But then he went again and again. He immersed himself in the Bible, spurred on by the hope that it could heal his mind. He clung to Romans 12:2, which says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (NKJV). He embraced Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things."

Church leader Jeff Weijohn encouraged him, saying, "The Word of God promises that it will change your mind if you study it."

Mitch began to see Bible promises fulfilled. Doctors who had said he would never work again were surprised to see him get a job and keep it.

After Bible studies, Mitch gave his heart to Jesus and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Then he became a Bible worker and started teaching the Bible to others. He and his wife opened their home to young people who needed a place to stay. Anyone was welcome if they followed the house rules. One rule was that everyone went to church on Sabbath.

The lives of their houseguests also began to change.

One young person joyfully told Jeff on Sabbath, "You know what? When you told us about the Bible, we didn't want to listen to you at all. But now we want to study the Bible."

Jeff said the change in Mitch's life was revolutionary.

"When he accepted God into his life, people didn't recognize him anymore," he said. "He came from being a person who was very hard and brain damaged to being a person able to minister. Many young people have been touched by him. God works through us despite ourselves."



An outreach program to Native Americans in Wapato and the surrounding region of Washington state got its start with the help of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 1990. A highlight of the program is the All Nations Center Adventist Church, pictured, which opened in 2001.