

October 5, 2014

Encountering the God Who Redeems

Exodus 4:1 – 31

I trust your hearts have been impacted as mine has by the story of Exodus as we have been looking at it for the past three weeks. Because it is an illustrated story of the God who rescues His people out of the slavery of serving an evil world ruler into the freedom of serving Him in worship. It is the story of the redemption of His people. If you want to know what redemption is all about, if you want to see a picture of how God saves His people, there are few better places to look than the story of Exodus, and the life of Moses. Because redemption is all about what God has done for us, not what we must do for Him. What we need to see as the central focus of Exodus is this picture of the awesome, faithful God who accomplishes our redemption. That big picture tends to get lost in the story as we read about the machinations of an evil ruler, the fumbling failures of a would-be deliverer, the devastation of ten horrible plagues, the stiff-necked rebellion of a chosen people, and all the tedious details of the law and the tabernacle.

But God is central here – not Pharaoh, not Moses, not the people or the law and the tabernacle. And what we need, what every man, woman and child needs, is an encounter with Him. As Ben shared last week, Exodus tells us that the way we get out, the way we move from slavery to salvation – the path to redemption – is an encounter with this God. How we become Christians, how we come to faith, how we grow in faith and holiness, how we move forward in our Christian lives, is rooted in an encounter with God. It is God who draws us in; He initiates everything; it is God who reveals Himself to us as our Savior, Redeemer, our rescuer; and it is God who sends us out on mission in the world to be a blessing to the world. What we need to see as we move through this book, is the magnificence and beauty and awesomeness of this great God.

We saw it in chapter three as God reveals Himself to Moses as 'I Am that I Am'. In the Bible, a person's name really sums up that person's story. That is why when people encounter God in the Bible, most often there is a name change – because their story changes. But God's name never changes – it is always 'I AM'. That is the essence of who He is. This is His name. All the other titles of God in the Old Testament – at least 16 different titles – are summed up in this one name – 'I AM'. When Moses says 'Lord I'm not adequate for this task', God replies, 'I know that. I AM'. When he says, 'What do I say?' He says, 'Say I AM sent you'. God was never depending on Moses to deliver His people. What Exodus shows us over and over is that God Himself is the One who saves, God is the One who rescues, God is the One who leads out, God is our Redeemer. And He is sending Moses back to His people who are in bondage to give them the good news that their redemption will be accomplished.

And now here in chapter four, Moses says, 'What if they don't believe me? What then, huh?' And God begins to paint for Moses, and us, this wonderful picture of redemption. He deals with Moses' unbelief; He deals with Moses' reluctance; He deals with Moses' resistance; He deals with Moses' disobedience and He leads His people to worship. ***He banishes unbelief; He conquers reluctance; He overcomes resistance; He deals with disobedience and leads us to worship Him.***

First of all we see God **dealing with Moses' unbelief**. And He does it again by showing Moses who He is. Moses says, 'What if they don't believe me? They're not going to believe You sent me.' Moses is pointing at them but the real unbelief is in His own heart. It is always so much easier to point at someone else and blame them. It was probably no doubt true that his own people wouldn't give him the time of day when he returned. After all it had been forty years since anyone had seen him, and his departure forty years ago hadn't gone so well. But the reality was that Moses himself didn't really believe that God could make good on His promise to deliver the people. You only have to read these first few chapters to see what a reluctant believer Moses really was. Here is a guy who ran from difficulty at the beginning, settled for obscurity in Midian and started back-pedaling like mad when God appeared to him in the bush.

So God gives Moses three signs – a staff that turns into a snake; a hand that turns leprous; and water that turns to blood. All three involved factors that were common in Egyptian life, religion and world view. These were not mere conjuring tricks. All three signs demonstrated God's sovereign power over all things.

Why did the staff turn into a snake and then back again? The apparent lesson here for Moses was that the snake represented the central symbol in Egyptian religion and sovereignty. The Pharaoh's of Egypt had adopted the cobra with a raised hood as their symbol of power, and they wore a crown with this cobra front and center to represent their lethal power over their enemies, and carried a staff that was the symbol of their royal power. The cobra crown was associated with the sun god Re, the 'Living King' who was the most powerful deity in Egypt. So with the crown and with the staff, the Pharaoh was proclaiming his unquestioned authority and sovereignty as a living god. So God tells Moses to throw *his* staff on the ground, it becomes a snake, and then tells him to pick it up by the tail and it turns back into a staff.

In doing this God is telling Moses at least two things. The first is that the power of the Pharaoh is no match for the power of God. After all, he has Moses pick the snake up by the tail – the worst possible place to grab a snake. Everybody knows that if you pick them up at all, it should be as close to the sharp end as possible, the head – not the tail. In other words, 'Moses, don't worry about the Pharaoh – he's about as dangerous as that staff you've got in your hand – I've got this'. The second thing God was demonstrating was His sovereign power over the devil – the ruler of this world – the ultimate snake. When Jesus came to this earth centuries later, He proclaimed this victory over this snake in the gospel of John: *Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.* John 12:31

Then God told Moses: *"Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.* Leprosy was thought to be incurable in these days, and historically Egypt was considered to be a notoriously unhealthy climate. And for Moses this was a sign of God's sovereign power over all disease. But it was more. It was also a sign of God's triumph over sin – the ultimate disease of all mankind. In the Bible, leprosy is identified with defilement, uncleanness. A leper had to warn people he was around by calling out, 'Unclean, unclean' and wasn't allowed to come within six feet of any other human, including his own family. The disease was considered so revolting that the leper wasn't permitted to come within 150 feet of anyone when the wind was blowing.

Leprosy is a picture of the very nature of sin – and while there is finally a cure for leprosy, there is no cure for sin apart from the sacrifice of Christ. Just as ancient cultures loathed leprosy, God loathes sin; it is revolting to Him. Sin bans us from the presence of a holy God because holiness cannot countenance sin. That's why Adam and Eve were driven from His presence in the beginning. When we've captured a glimpse of the holiness and purity of God, we have to exclaim as did the prophet Isaiah, *"Woe to me ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"* But what this passage tell us is that God is sovereign over the power of sin, and it is pointing to the ultimate victory of God over sin at the cross of Christ; and now we can confidently approach a holy God, with all our sin and uncleanness and defilement and be restored.

Finally, the Lord tells Moses: *"If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."* This third sign, the polluting of the Nile, struck at the very heart of Egypt's existence. The god of the Nile, Hapi, was seen as one of the most powerful gods of ancient Egypt, and this was a blow aimed straight at him. Every year the Nile flooded and deposited as much as thirty feet of the most fertile black soil in the Nile Delta; and this incredibly fertile soil was the foundation for Egypt's great wealth and power and influence in the region. To threaten destruction of the Nile was to proclaim sovereignty over not only the god's of Egypt, but Egypt itself.

But as with the other two signs, this one had a deeper significance as well. Turning water into blood was pointing to another Great Deliverer who would turn waters of death into the wine of life. If you look ahead to Exodus 7, you see that the turning of water into blood was the first public miracle that Moses did in Egypt; and in John 2 we see the first public miracle that Jesus did was to turn water into wine. Turning water to blood initiated Moses as the deliverer of his people, leading them out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land; turning water into wine initiated Jesus as the deliverer of mankind, leading them out slavery to sin into the freedom of Christ. What this points to is the ultimate purpose of God to redeem all things through the blood of His Son.

God deals with Moses' unbelief, but He also **deals with his reluctance**. *But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since You have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."* You need to notice something here about Moses' reluctance. It is a reluctance based upon his own appraisal of himself, and it stands in direct conflict with God's appraisal. Notice that first of all he is addressing the LORD. And when you see that word in your Bible in capital letters, it stands for Yahweh – the I AM. And the text tells us that Moses said to **Yahweh**, 'Lord'. And this word is not all capitalized because this word is **Adonay** – master, lord. In other words, Moses is acknowledging on the one hand, God's power and omnipotence to do anything He wants, and on the other hand, limiting that power to his own ability. He appeals to the Sovereign One, implying that He can do anything He wants, and in the next breath makes his own inabilities the determining factor.

If God is truly sovereign, if God is not limited by anything, if He is sovereign Lord and ruler, Maker of the universe and master, then the only reasonable response is to say 'Yes'. **It is His omnipotence that counts, not our incompetence**. It is as though God says, 'Look Moses, you call Me Yahweh, you call me Sovereign, you call Me master. Why then can't you simply say 'Okay'? Don't you believe what you say? Why are you talking about gifts you have or haven't got? Who made you anyway?' *"Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."* If Moses was a poor speaker, was this news to God? Does God have trouble keeping track of who is deaf, who is blind, and who is mute? Does Moses really think God made a mistake here? The fact that Moses believed that he was not eloquent is completely beside the point. The God who created the most eloquent mouths who ever lived was on his side. God deals with a reluctant Moses by introducing him to the awesome majesty of God.

Furthermore, Moses was not being completely honest with the Lord. After forty years as a shepherd, Moses no longer **felt** qualified, but his current feelings did not change the past. Listen to the description of Moses in his first forty years; *'...he was a man of power in words and deeds.'* Acts 7:22. He had been a man of eloquence in Egypt. The last forty years hasn't somehow destroyed a gift that God had originally given him. Instead the last forty years have worked to change his position from a man of self-confidence to a someone completely unsure of himself. But that change is actually a necessary condition for the mission. God will not allow Moses to go to Pharaoh leaning on his own wisdom, or talent, or eloquence. He is going to have to lean on the Lord alone. His ability to deliver Israel and impact Pharaoh will have nothing to do with his words and everything to do with God's words. As Paul told the Corinthians: *And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.* 1 Corinthians 2:4-5

But the text tells us that Moses had one final argument. *But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else."* What we see here is the real issue. The real issue is not whether he has any credibility with his people, or that he doesn't have the gifting and ability to do the job, the real issue comes down to his resistance. The Lord has answered all his questions; He has dealt with his unbelief and his reluctance; but now the Lord **deals with his resistance**. And just so we understand how crucial this is, the Bible puts this response in terms we can understand. *Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses.* What this doesn't mean is that all of a sudden God finally loses His temper with Moses. God doesn't lose His temper. Very often there are figures of speech in the Old Testament used to describe a God who is Spirit, a God who is totally other, the **I AM**, in ways that we humans can understand. It talks about the hand of God, or the face of God or the back of God – human words to describe a God no man has seen.

And here the writer does that as well. The Hebrew doesn't actually say that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses here. What it says literally is that *'The nose of the Lord heated up'*. Much like we would say, 'He was so angry his face turned red'. It is a human term used to describe a divine being. It is a description of a common human emotional activity ascribed to unexplainable divinity. It doesn't mean that God is up and down in His emotional life like we are, inconsistently controlled by outside forces. But it does indicate that God is not an emotional statue. He is not an unmoved, unfeeling, uncaring, emotionally detached being. **He is a God that deeply cares about stuff. He cares about right and wrong and obedience.** And so His divine displeasure is described in that His anger was kindled.

But look how he deals with Moses' resistance. *He said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."* There is no question that this omnipotent God will have His way. He will overcome all of Moses' resistance. When God chooses, He overcomes any resistance raised to His sovereign choice. That is why we call it 'Irresistible Grace'. Ultimately God chooses and God calls, and those He calls must respond. We have no options other than complete rebellion or full compliance.

But God always grants His intended blessing in such a way as to expose our weakness and magnify His grace. Look at what God does. He says, 'Okay, you are going to be my instrument to deliver My people, but I'll speak to You, you will speak to Aaron your brother, and he'll speak to the people for Me'. But don't think this was an unintended consequence of Moses' resistance. This wasn't, as some might be tempted to think, Plan B for God. God doesn't have Plan B – He doesn't need it. His plan is always Plan A, and all our efforts to derail His plans simply work to effect His Plan A. Notice here that God tells Moses that Aaron is already on his way to Moses. God had him coming all the time. Furthermore, we are going to see how intricately and essentially Aaron's place in all this has been planned by God. Aaron was no divine afterthought of God but an essential part of His plan.

Maybe you are tempted from time to time to think that if only at that critical juncture in your life you had made that other decision, took that other job, married that other person, that you wouldn't now find yourself in what looks like Plan B. But you have to know that for those love God and are called according to His purpose, there was never a Plan B. It's always Plan A for you. If you understand God as the Bible reveals Him then you know that He is not, as C.S. Lewis once wrote – '**a twig to be trodden underfoot, or a leaf to be blown off course**'. Alex Motyer, in his excellent commentary on this passage says it best I think: ***The mercy of God understands our weakness and meets us in our frailties; the sovereign magnificence of God fulfills His own purposes without adjustment or alteration – from beginning to end.***

At this point, Moses returns home, asks for a leave of absence from his father-in-law, Jethro, hears from God that it is safe to go back to Egypt, loads up his wife and two children on a donkey and heads back to Egypt. And then we come to this weird little story about circumcision. And I know we are tempted to sort of skip this and get to the end. But God put this precisely here for a reason. God speaks to Moses and says: *When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is My firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let My son go that he may serve Me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'*

And then we read: *At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.* This is as mysterious as it is confusing. The first mystery is to identify who it was that the Lord sought to put to death. The text only identifies the target as 'him.' 'The Lord met **him** and sought to put **him** to death.' There are two possibilities. Either it refers to Moses, or to his son. The wording of the original Hebrew allows for either interpretation. It is difficult to say but the real point being made is the same in either case. I happen to believe it is the firstborn son of Moses. If you read the immediate context in which the Lord tells Moses what he has to tell Pharaoh about the Lord's firstborn son, Israel and Pharaoh's firstborn, and then read about Moses' firstborn son being circumcised, then it becomes clear who it is that is being talked about. If Moses' firstborn is the Lord's target, that would make perfect sense to what will happen in Egypt. Pharaoh was disobedient to God when he refused to obey God's command to let His people go, and God killed his firstborn. And Moses was disobedient to God's command to circumcise his son, and God sought to kill his firstborn.

There seem to be at least two things going on here. The first is the fact that God is **dealing with Moses' disobedience**. Moses was an Egyptian, but first he was a Hebrew, and he had not obeyed the command of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to circumcise his son. God would not allow a disobedient lawbreaker to later give His law to God's people at the holy mountain.

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant, of the seal of God's promises to His people that He initiated with Abraham. This was the distinguishing mark of God's chosen and called people to whom His promises had been made and calling them to live under the grace which the promises clearly expressed. To not obey God's command to circumcise his son, especially his firstborn son, was to act as though the promises had not been made. **It was to act as though he had no need of God.** But you have to ask, 'What is the point of including this bloody ceremony in the narrative. Couldn't we get the point without all the blood and description of body parts?' Undeniably it was a bloody ceremony – the text tells us that Zipporah took a flint, circumcised her son, and touched Moses' feet with the bloody foreskin, and called him 'a bridegroom of blood'. What is going on here?

What is going on here is that this incident is linked to two other significant events in Scripture. **The first is the blood covenant that God made with Abram in Genesis 15.** Two chapters later God changes his name to Abraham and makes circumcision the *sign* of that covenant. Any male who wasn't circumcised would be cut off from his people. **The second event is the Passover:** the firstborn son was saved from God's *wrath* in Egypt by the *blood* of the Passover lamb. God's *firstborn* Son Israel was spared from death, while the *wrath* of God destroyed all of Egypt's *firstborn* sons. Then in Exodus chapter 12 *God interweaves the requirement of circumcision* for any Gentile who wanted to keep Passover, becoming part of God's redeemed people Israel. It was the wrath of God that had threatened Moses's firstborn son with death and it was the blood of the circumcision that spared him.

But this circumcision could never save us from our sins. It was never meant to. Circumcision in the flesh serves only to highlight the promises of God to save His people and to point to the One whom God would send to shed His own blood to accomplish that salvation. In fact, it points ahead to the promise of God in Deuteronomy 30, anticipating the time when Jesus would come and make good on that promise: *And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.* Deuteronomy 30:6

Here in Exodus, God calls Israel His firstborn son. But this son was only meant to point to the ultimate firstborn Son – God's only Son, Jesus Christ. In Exodus, the firstborn son, one nation, Israel, was redeemed by God with the blood of a lamb. But 2000 years later, it was the firstborn Son of God who redeemed the world with His own blood. That's the reason we have this bloody interlude. It points us to the ultimate end of redemption – loving God with all our heart and with all our soul – **worship. God redeems His people in order that they might worship Him.** All that Christ has done is to lead us to worship Him. Look at what happens at the end of this chapter. Moses meets Aaron; he gives him his marching orders; they both go to Egypt and proclaim this good news to their people; and verse 31 says: *And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.*

You see, our problem is that we don't love God with all our heart and soul. Our hearts are fatally attracted to everything but God. And as a result we stand condemned under the wrath of God – the wrath of God against sin. And we will die just like all the firstborn of Egypt unless we are covered by the blood of the covenant. We are unbelieving, reluctant, resistant, disobedient people who need our hearts circumcised to love God supremely. And it is only when by faith we believe in what the Father's firstborn son has done, it is only when we appeal to that blood Christ shed on the cross and stand under its protective flow, that God comes in and circumcises our hearts to love Him and worship Him and serve Him. He is our ultimate bridegroom of blood, who poured out His own blood to redeem us.

*Our gracious God and Father,
We thank You for Your redeeming love that saw our bondage and heard our cries for help and sent Your Son to rescue us. Before Your cross, O Christ, we kneel and see the awfulness of our sin, our iniquity that caused You to be made a curse for us – shedding Your blood to redeem Your people. There infinite evil was swallowed up in the infinite worth of the blood of Jesus. There was the enemy of our souls crushed and our sin buried in the ocean of redeeming blood. There at the cross You banish our unbelief; You conquer our reluctance; You overcome our resistance; You deal with our disobedience and You lead us to worship You. Make us a people who truly delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious name of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, Amen.*