

# Encountering God

By Brad Allison on 6/29/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 3*

We're talking today about this encounter with God that Moses had at the burning bush. Moses has a personal encounter with God here. He meets God and talks with him face to face, like a friend talks with a friend. At the beginning of his classic book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer says the following about knowing God. The same could be said about encountering God.

Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life with it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul (pp. 14-15).

Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush is a pattern for us, showing us how we too can have such an encounter. This applies to those who have never had an encounter with the living God, as well as to those who have, but who have managed to get along just fine in their Christian lives without ever having any regular encounters with God. There is a powerful image in the book of Revelation of Jesus standing outside the door of the church in Laodicea, knocking to get in. I've always wondered what the church is doing. They don't seem to notice that Jesus is absent, and his absence doesn't seem to slow them down any in doing their church thing. The same can happen to any follower of Jesus. So all of us need an encounter with the living God. The passage before us this morning shows us how an encounter with God begins, how it continues, and what such an encounter leads to.

## I. How An Encounter with God Begins

Moses had his encounter with God in the desert. Have you noticed how often God meets his people in the desert? It seems to be his preferred place. God often meets us when we are feeling needy and desperate.

Illustration: During World War II the famous American pilot, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, was flying on a special mission to the Pacific Islands. The plane crashed, and Rickenbacker and his crew were lost at sea for twenty-one days. Rickenbacker wrote of that experience: "In the beginning many of the men were atheists or agnostics, but at the end of the terrible ordeal each, in his own way, discovered God. Each man found God in the vast, empty loneliness of the ocean. Each man found salvation and strength in prayer, and a community of feeling developed which created a liveliness of human fellowship and worship, and a sense of gentle peace."

Some of you are in the desert right now, and you don't know how you will be able to last much longer. Consider that God may have brought you to this precise point in order to meet with you.

The second thing I notice here about how an encounter with God begins comes from a phrase that is repeated twice. When Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed, he "*turned aside*" to see it. Moses had seen many fires, and he had seen many bushes, and he had undoubtedly seen bushes on fire. But he had never before seen a burning bush that was not consumed. An encounter with God begins when we turn aside to look at something that is

different than what we expect to see. It is when reality is different than the pattern we expected to see.

Let me give some examples of this. A person works for a long time to acquire success in his career. Then one day when success is achieved, it is found to be empty. That is something different than what was expected, and it will often lead to an encounter with God if the person will turn aside to look at it. Another example would be of someone who does everything she thinks a good Christian is supposed to do, but who feels completely empty spiritually. She thought that if she read her Bible and prayed everyday, that she was supposed to be filled with joy. But it didn't happen that way, and she finds herself empty instead. Spiritual emptiness is one of the most common examples of this I know. Or someone else breaks all the rules in an attempt to bring satisfaction to his life by doing what he wants. But he finds at the end of all the rule-breaking that he is only miserable instead of satisfied.

Note that it was only when God saw Moses turn aside that he called to him and that Moses had this encounter with God. One of the reasons we don't have an encounter with God is that we never turn aside to consider the burning bushes in our lives. We just keep going. Tim Keller imagines what Moses' response may have been if he was a typical New Yorker, and the typical suburbanite is about the same. Moses could have said, "I'm not getting paid to examine burning bushes, but to take care of sheep." Or he might have said, "Would someone please put that thing out!" We miss God when we get too locked in to the busy routines of life and never pause to consider what God is doing in our lives.

Illustration: In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis imagines a senior demon training a junior demon in the craft of temptation and spiritual destruction. The senior demon warns his trainee not to be too obvious with the temptation. A frontal attack that attempts to get a person to deny Christ in some explicit manner would almost never work. A far more effective approach would be simply to introduce busyness into a person's life.

So if we are to have an encounter with God, we must turn aside to consider the burning bushes in our lives. I was talking to someone this week who reported that he had a pattern of moving every three years in his life. It was only when he recognized this pattern as something of a burning bush and turned aside to look at it that God brought him into a fresh and transforming encounter with Himself. He saw that he was moving so often in an attempt to be the hero and rescue bad job situations.

## II. How An Encounter with God Continues

If Moses encounter begins when he considers how reality is different than what he expected, it continues when he comes to see how God is different than what he expected. God reveals himself to Moses both as more holy than expected and more loving than expected. His holiness is seen in several ways here. God's first words to Moses, after calling his name, are the words, "Do not come near." Then he is told to remove his sandals, because the very ground where he is standing is holy ground. Why does a person have to remove his sandals when in God's presence? Perhaps you remember that after Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the ground. Moses had been walking on cursed ground. And just as we honor a housekeeper by taking off muddy boots before traipsing through a house with spotless, white carpets, so Moses must honor the holiness of God by removing his sandals.

I also notice here how God is far more loving than Moses could have anticipated. We can see that in this dialogue Moses has with God for the next chapter and a half. The remarkable thing about this dialogue is how Moses shares his honest questions with God. God announces

his plan to free Israel and to use Moses to do this, and Moses asks, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” (v. 11). God reassures him with the promise that it’s not about Moses at all, but about God, and God promises to go with him. Then Moses anticipates another objection. What gives him any right to speak on behalf of the Israelites? How is it that they will recognize Moses’ authority and leadership? And on and on it goes, with Moses’ questions sounding a great deal like a twelve-year-old who’s told to go cut the grass, and who then comes up with ten objections of why it’s not such a good idea for him to do it. But God allows the dialogue, and responds to Moses with friendship and patience, a far more loving response than we would anticipate from a holy God to a sinful man.

Aren’t these two things contradictory? How is it that God can say to Moses, “Don’t come near” and then turn right around and enter into an intimate dialogue with him in which he listens to Moses’ whinings? If God is so holy, why doesn’t he judge Moses right here on the spot for his complaining, whining heart? The real wonder of this passage isn’t how could a bush burn and not be consumed but how can Moses stand before God and not be consumed.

Every true encounter with God must include both these elements of God’s holiness and love being greater than imagined. Much of what it means for God to be God is that he is both holy and loving. One of the reasons this passage is such a foundational passage is that it contains a section where God gives himself the name that becomes the most common name for God in the Bible. When Moses asks God about what he should say to the elders of Israel when they ask him the name of this God who has sent him, God says, “I am who I am” (v. 14). In the original Hebrew, this name for God is simply four consonants, JHWH. In order to avoid ever misusing the name of God, the Jews wouldn’t even pronounce this name. Every time they came to it in the Hebrew text, they would substitute another name for God, Adonai. But this name JHWH becomes the most common name for God in the Bible. The missing vowels are probably “a” and “e”, thus producing the name *Jahweh*. This name is commonly written Jehovah, which comes from interposing the vowels from Adonai onto these four consonants. It is noted in most English translations by the word LORD, written all in uppercase. If you see the word “Lord,” written with lowercase letters after the initial letter, that is the translation of the other common word for God, Adonai.

But in any case, this name for God is translated in our Bibles: “I am who I am.” Isn’t that rather curious? What does it mean? It means that God is who he is, and not who we want him to be. God doesn’t give himself the name, “I am who you want me to be.” If we were to make up a god, we would inevitably make up one who is either just holiness or just love, but not both at the same time. Many religions have a holy God who rewards people who do what they’re supposed to do. Other religions have a god who loves everybody no matter what they do. We come to have an encounter with God when we understand that he is both holy and loving at the same time.

Illustration: My first encounter with God came when I was a freshman in college and came to understand that God was both holy and loving. I had been raised in a Presbyterian church that was more on the liberal side of things. The main message I heard as I sat in that pew throughout my growing up years was that God’s job was to love me no matter what I did. During my first year of college, I was in a study on the book of Romans where I saw for the first time that God was not just like a loving grandfather who had to love you no matter what you did. He was also a just and holy God who had to punish sin. I came to faith in Jesus only after I saw that Jesus was the only Mediator between a holy God who must punish sin and a sinner like myself. God both punished sin and loved me in Jesus.

So Moses continued in his encounter with God as he discovered that God is different than he had imagined, being both more holy and loving than he thought. Let me say this a little differently. If you want to have a

relationship with God, you must allow God to challenge you and surprise you with who he is, just as occurs in our personal relationships.

Illustration: For example, I came home a few weeks ago on a Saturday afternoon after finishing my sermon, and found my wife crying on the sofa while watching a television program on The Learning Channel. It was a program about women who were working as artists. My wife has the heart of an artist, and the program simply touched a deep longing she had to create. I had known that about Wendy, but I learned that day just how strong her desire to create really was.

Application: If you are going to have an encounter with God, you must allow him to surprise you like that. The application is to come to God through prayer and meditation on his word with this in mind. Ask yourself as you come to him, "How is God both more holy and more loving than I thought?" When you read his word, take notice of what he commands that you fall short of. Notice too the depth of his love for you there.

### III. What An Encounter with God Leads To

Let me anticipate what I bet 80% of you are thinking right now. "This is pretty basic stuff. I know that God is both holy and loving and that Jesus is the way that God can be both just and love me at the same time." Well, there's a test here to determine if you know that as well as you think you do. This encounter that Moses had with God led him to be sent out by God for a task that was difficult and impossible without God's help. He was sent to Pharaoh to say, "Pharaoh, you know that slave force that is building all those cities for you and enriching your kingdom? Would you let them leave your kingdom?" God even tells Moses that Pharaoh will not listen to him, and still Moses says he will go. This calling and sending out is a pattern repeated with others throughout the Bible. Isaiah sees the holiness and love of God and says, "Here am I, send me" (Isaiah 6). Jeremiah experiences the same thing.

If we have really had an encounter with God, the result will be that we will serve this God no matter what he asks us to do. Have the holiness and love of God penetrated your heart to that degree, so that they become the dominant force of your life?

### CONCLUSION:

I want to close by inviting us all into an encounter with the living God right now in the Lord's Supper. It is appropriate that we end this way, because it is God's last word to us. Do you remember his first words to Moses: "Do not come near." Yet we come near to him here in the Lord's Supper. We are invited to dine with God here. In the Lord's Supper, we hear God's final word, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).