

One Greater than Moses

By Brad Allison on 7/13/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 4*

It's pretty obvious that Moses just doesn't want to go to Pharaoh with God's message that Pharaoh must let the people go. Moses thinks up a whole series of reasons why he can't do this, and God patiently answers each one. The truth finally comes out only when Moses can't think of any further excuses, and he blurts out, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (v. 13). It's not hard to imagine why Moses didn't want to go to Pharaoh with this message. After all, Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world, and Moses was told just to waltz right into his office and tell him to let go the very people who were largely responsible for his power and wealth. Moses doesn't want to do it, and nothing God says is going to persuade him.

He reminds me of the wife of Robert Fulton. You may remember that Fulton is known as the inventor of the steamboat. When he was first working on his invention in his workshop, his wife came to him and said, "You'll never get that thing to work, and even if you do you'll never be able to get it out." Much to her surprise, he did get it to work. He took it to his front yard where he began working to attach it to a boat. He wife's response was to say, "I don't know why you are spending so much time on that thing; you'll never get it to the river." Again, contrary to her prediction, he did get both the boat and its engine to the river. His wife followed him there and said, "I don't know why you are wasting your time; you'll never get that thing to start." As you know, he did get it started and began moving down the river, whereupon his wife ran down the bank of the river shouting to him, "You'll never get that thing stopped. You never will."

Like Fulton's wife, Moses was dead set against God's plan to use him to deliver Israel from Pharaoh, and nothing God said or did would change that. Moses' basic objection was that he was ill-equipped for the task. The last time he had been to Egypt with a hope of delivering Israel, he had been stung by the response he received. "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" (2:14). But his biggest hesitation stemmed from his estimate of his own lack of giftedness. In particular, he judged himself to be "slow of speech and of tongue" (v. 10). Literally, it says that his tongue was heavy. In other words, he just wasn't very good at communicating through the spoken word. Moses' solution was to ask God to get someone else for the job.

I can identify with Moses here. Even though I talk for a living, I am often at a complete loss for the right words. Someone comes to me with a need in their lives, and I don't know what to tell them. My wife asks me for a decision regarding some situation at home, and I don't know what to tell her. I have a conversation with a neighbor or a parent from my daughter's soccer team, and I will want to bring the conversation around to spiritual things, but I find myself often unable to do so. What I often want to say in these situations is, "God, isn't there someone else you can send to do this?"

If you know the end of this story, you know that God ultimately does use Moses in a powerful way to go to Pharaoh with the words of God. This is a pivotal chapter in the development of Moses. Prior to this chapter, Moses had said, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). In the words of John Piper, it is as if Moses is saying, "God, in comparison to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, I am nothing. Can a pansy say to an oak tree: 'Lie down, oak, and let some sun in here on this pansy patch!'" Prior to this chapter, Moses is filled with fear and timidity, summarized by his request in our chapter, "Send someone else" (v. 13). And then we read after this chapter that Moses was able boldly to go before Pharaoh with exactly the message God had given him. The pansy was able to walk right up to the oak tree and say, "God tells you to let his little pansy patch go, and if

you refuse, he is going to fell this great oak and throw it into the Red Sea.” What can explain such a change from timidity to fearlessness in the service of God, and is it possible that God can do the same kind of work in our lives? I want us to consider two points as we try to answer that question. First, let’s look at several truths from this passage that are helpful but insufficient by themselves to explain this change. Then I want us to look at one truth that is both helpful and sufficient.

I. Some Helpful but Insufficient Truths

The first truth we encounter here is that God is the author of powerful signs. God empowers Moses with three signs, three miracles that can be used to persuade both Israel and Pharaoh that Moses speaks with God’s message. These miracles are called signs because they point to something. They point to the breaking in of the kingdom of God, showing those who witness them something about God and his work. For example, the sign of the rod turning into a snake shows that God will work powerfully both to protect his people (just as a shepherd’s rod protects the sheep) and to strike the wolves (as a snake strikes its adversaries). The sign of the water from the Nile turning to blood also points to something. Egypt had earlier filled the Nile with the blood of Israel’s infants. Egyptians regarded the waters of the Nile as sacred, as a god. Now the true God will fill this river with the blood of its slain god.

So God demonstrates his complete power to Moses by these signs. Most people I talk to, and I would include myself in this, think that if God would just come down occasionally and do some powerful miracle like this, that it would sure help his cause. Surely it would lead people to believe in him. But the biblical record shows that it wouldn’t have that effect at all. It doesn’t in this case. After God demonstrates these signs to Moses, he is still filled with objections regarding God’s plans. We know these signs proved insufficient in the case of Pharaoh. After working initially with the leaders of Israel, they ultimately failed to persuade them as well, as seen by the fact that they ultimately rebelled against Moses’ leadership. So powerful signs are inadequate to change a person from being a timid follower of God to a bold and fearless follower.

The next truth we see here that is helpful but insufficient to change Moses from timidity to boldness in serving God is the truth of the providence of God. When we speak of God’s providence, we mean that God is in control of his universe. His involvement with the universe didn’t end with creation, but extends to his active governing of the universe, down to the smallest detail. Let’s notice how God teaches this to Moses. He does so in response to Moses’ objection about being slow of speech. Let’s look a little more carefully at Moses’ objection. He says that he is “not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant” (v. 10). Moses is telling God, “I have never been a man of words in my past. My verbal score on the SAT was quite low. What’s more, nothing has changed since we’ve been talking here at this burning bush. I’ll be glad to go once you change me and make me eloquent, but until then I’ll just keep tending these sheep.”

Notice how God answers this objection. “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (v. 11). This series of questions teaches both the doctrine of creation and providence. God has created man’s mouth, but he also governs the universe by deciding the precise giftedness or handicap of each person. God creates every single person as he sees fit. Embedded in this verse is a very important truth. The God who created Moses with all of his gifts and limitations is the same God who appointed him to be Israel’s deliverer. God could have made Moses any way he wanted, including giving him the greatest verbal abilities ever given to a human being. But he deliberately chose to make him slow of speech. The very weakness that Moses thought should

disqualify him from this role, God says is what qualifies him. God often works through our weaknesses to accomplish his work.

Application: Before moving on, we need to pause here for an application. I would like to ask you to call to mind some weakness in your life. Maybe you think of yourself as too bald, too gray, too fat, or too skinny. Or perhaps you have the kind of face not generally considered attractive by others. Maybe it's a mental capacity that is not what you would like it to be. For example, I tend to be very concrete in my thinking and not as creative as I would like. Whatever weakness is in your mind right now, this passage teaches us two things that are true about that weakness, and two things God calls us to believe about it. First, God in his providence decided to put it there. It was his decision, and it was a wise decision. Second, God will use you not *in spite* of your weakness but *because* of it. Note that God didn't change Moses into an eloquent man before sending him to Pharaoh. God's desire was for Moses simply to admit his weakness and trust God when it was time for Moses to open his mouth. In this way, God would receive the glory through Moses' weakness.

As important as the above two truths are, neither the truth of God's power through miraculous signs nor the providence of God were enough to transform Moses from a timid, fearful man to the bold man who will declare to Pharaoh the words of God. At the end of God's declaration of these two truths to him, Moses is still saying, "please send someone else." Something else was needed, and that's what we want to look at in our next point.

II. A Helpful and Sufficient Truth

The real turning point between timidity and boldness in Moses' life occurs in the most puzzling part of this chapter. Moses is on his way to Egypt when God meets him and seeks to put him to death. This part of the story catches the reader unprepared. It seems not to fit at all. After going through everything that brings Moses to this point, why does God now appear to him to take his life at the very time that he is headed to Egypt to do God's work? Let's begin by noticing what's clear. God's action was prompted by Moses' failure to circumcise his son. God had said in Genesis 17:14 that "any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken covenant." Moses had failed to keep this covenant requirement for his son, thus making him just like the Egyptians, a covenant breaker. It was only after his wife, Zipporah, took matters into her own hands and circumcised their son and then touched the feet of Moses with the bloody foreskin that God's wrath was averted.

Do any of the elements of this story sound familiar to you? Blood is applied, with the result that God's anger is turned away. It sounds like the Passover, doesn't it? The blood of the lamb is applied to the doorposts of the house and the angel of death passes over that house instead of killing the firstborn. This is the story of redemption, and one of the central truths of redemption is stated in Hebrews 9:22, where we read, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." I don't know if Moses was saved here, but I do know that he came face to face with a holy God whose just demands required that Moses die, and Moses was rescued only by blood. Further, it seems that it was the blood that worked and not Zipporah's obedience. Does it seem to you that she's kind of ticked at Moses, his God and the ways of his God. She seems to me to be excluding herself from Moses and his God when she says, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me." She resents the fact that rescue has to come through blood. But the truth is that rescue can only come through blood, and all this talk of blood is meant to teach us about the blood of the only sacrifice that can avert the wrath of God. It is Jesus' death that can turn away God's holy anger at covenant-breaking sinners.

This event becomes that which changes Moses' timidity into a boldness simply because once you've faced a holy God who knows you fully, and once you have experienced the turning aside of his anger because of the blood, then facing a merely earthly ruler like Pharaoh is a piece of cake. Once you come to believe that this holy God accepts you because of the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus, then a great boldness begins to characterize your life and ministry.

Illustration: There are many analogies that help in this, and most of the ones I can think of are in the area of sports. A good downhill skier, for example, is constantly on the edge of wiping out. Consequently, the only way to be a good downhill skier is not to be afraid of wiping out. Such a fear will keep you from going fast enough. If you are racing a small sailboat, you need to know that it goes fastest when it is on the verge of turning over in the water. Again, if you are to sail at the greatest speed, you can't be afraid of turning over. That's why one of the first things sailing instructors do is to deliberately turn over the boat, so the student can see that it's not fatal. In the same way, the only way to be a bold spokesman for the Lord is to face your death and certain judgment before God, but then to see that the judgment has been removed by the blood of Jesus. It is through believing that every day that we gain boldness.

Such an experience gives us a trust in God. Prior to this experience, Moses didn't trust God. We can see that in the fact that he essentially called God a liar. God had told Moses in the previous chapter that the elders of Israel would listen to his voice (3:18). Then at the beginning of this chapter, he says, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice" (4:1). Moses was calling God a liar. Then we also see Moses' distrust of God in his desire for a dress rehearsal. Remember that Moses had said that he had never been eloquent, "either in the past or *since you have spoken to your servant*" (v. 10). He wanted some assurance that he was going to be able to do this by seeing God prepare him before he went. He wanted a dress rehearsal because he wasn't quite sure God would come through on opening night. Only a daily experience of trusting in the blood of Jesus for the remission of sins will give us a boldness in serving God and an ability to trust him in ministry.

CONCLUSION:

Have you ever said what Moses said here? "Oh, Lord, please send someone else." "Lord, this is a job for our pastor. He's been trained for this in seminary. You need to send him and not me." Let me tell you that I am that pastor who has been to seminary, and I still say the same thing to God. I almost always feel that surely God can find a better candidate than me to send, because I don't have a clue what I should say half the time. Has it begun to dawn on you yet that God is saying the same thing to you that he said to Moses? "I'm sending you, and you're going to have to trust me to give you the words to say at the right time. I know your weaknesses because I made them, and my strength will be seen in using you just as you are." This doesn't mean that we should not prepare ourselves as best we can, but even after the preparation, we will still feel ill-equipped.

During our vacation a couple of weeks ago, God gave me the opportunity to speak to someone for a couple of hours about his faith. I entered into it with fear and trembling, not being at all confident that I wouldn't botch things. But God gave me boldness and used me, and it was a glorious experience. God wants to use you as well. Don't wait until you feel ready to go. If you've faced this holy God who met Moses to kill him, and received his forgiveness and acceptance through the blood of Jesus, applied by faith, then you are ready to face boldly anything God brings your way. So leave here in bold faith.