

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus  
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Exodus 3, 4 - Meeting God

We're looking at how we see God and ourselves through the book of Exodus and we're concentrating on the idea of Story. We all have a story and we all believe in certain stories. I'm asking you to put yourself in this story because it is true and, if you are a Christian, it is yours. It tells you who you are and explains many things about yourself, your experiences and the way the world works. And all stories use symbols to drive them forward.

You believe in a ton of other stories, but which ones are primary for you? What about the story of Progress? This tells you that things are getting better and better, that new is good and old is bad. Its symbol might be the computer. What about the story of Information? It tells you that the problems of the world are knowledge problems and that things can be fixed with more and more information. Its symbol might be the newspaper, magazine or now the internet. And we also have the story of Science, and its ardent believers, who Neil Postman calls Scientism. (not Christian Scientism) This tells us that we can learn, observe, fix and mold the world to make it a better place. Its symbols are numbers, facts and statistics.<sup>2</sup>

Neil Postman captures this succinctly: "Into this void comes the Technopoly story, with its emphasis on progress without limits, rights without responsibilities, and technology without cost. The Technopoly story is without a moral center. It promises heaven on earth through the conveniences of technological progress. It casts aside all traditional narratives and symbols that suggest stability and orderliness, and tells, instead of a life of skills, technical expertise, and the ecstasy of consumption. Its purpose is to produce functionaries for an ongoing Technopoly."<sup>3</sup>

Are any of those the Biblical story? What difference would it make if the Story of the Bible molded your thoughts instead of Progress, Intelligence and Science? What if the Biblical symbols made meaning for you instead of those of advertising, pop culture and even revered historical sites?

In this text we see the further unfolding of this theme of story and symbols through questions. Let's ask them together.

### ***What in the World?***

Our first question comes right away in our text. Remember that Moses is shepherding out in the boondocks. He's left Egypt and all its wealth and grandeur, has married and now works for this father-in-law tending the sheep.

One day. That's the way good stories start, don't they? Something has to change for the story to be interesting. You don't read or watch or listen to stories about normal days. Something has to change. One day, Moses saw something unusual. Unusual is putting it mildly. He saw something extraordinary. Paranormal if you will.

He saw a bush burning. That wouldn't have been that strange, since it was hot and bushes may have caught on fire regularly. But this one didn't burn up. The flame was there but the bush didn't burn up. In the midst of the flame was something that Moses describes as The Angel of the Lord. *That is amazing*, he thinks or says. And he goes to check it out.

This is a small point, but an important one. What has happened is that Moses has seen something, experienced something, is wondering something that doesn't fit with his worldview. In Moses' world, bushes burn up with fire. And Angels don't hang out in them. This one doesn't. And there's an angel. What is left to think? There are only three possibilities. One is that he isn't really seeing this at all. It's a trick. Magic maybe. Optical illusion. That's why he's going to check it out. The second is that perhaps he's been in the desert too long and has gone a little crazy. I need a glass of water. I'm seeing things.

The third is, and he might have gone through the first two before he got to the third, that he doesn't know everything about the way the world works. There is new information he hadn't previously accounted for that he needs now to consider.

That's going to happen to you. Maybe it already has. Something will occur in your life that you just don't get. The information won't add up. You won't understand.

That's a marker for you, a sign and symbol. It's saying to you – you need to consider that you don't know everything and you should check it out. After all, that's what Moses does. He gets off the path and goes out of his way, off the beaten track in order to investigate.

It might be a terrible tragedy in your life. It might be a discovery of something you hadn't known. It might be a book, or a thought, or a song. It might be a person. It might be the divorce of your parents. Or the dashing of your dream.

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**Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:** By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2007, website: [www.ouruf.org](http://www.ouruf.org). For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Childs, Pink, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

<sup>2</sup> These are thoughts from Neil Postman's *Technopoly* book.

<sup>3</sup> *Technopoly*, Neil Postman, 179

For me, one of these experiences was the three-month premature birth of my daughter, Ruth. I asked What in the world is going on here? Why is this happening? And I began a journey to discover God's sovereignty and goodness in my life.

Get off the path of your life. Get out of the well-worn ruts and look and ask when something doesn't make sense to you. It's a good question, one that if asked honestly, can lead to tremendous discovery.

### ***Who Are You?***

When Moses goes to look at the bush, he finds out some amazing things. I am confident that when you make an honest investigation, you will too. Moses finds out who God is in this passage.

Remember that Moses hadn't been looking for this. He hadn't set off to find God. God found him. What did he show Moses about himself?

#### *God is a fire*

The first thing we learn is from the symbol of the burning bush itself. God often shows himself as fire. Notice as you read how many times he appears this way. He did so in Genesis already, and he will again in Exodus several times. Realizing that God can pick any symbol for himself, we need to ask ourselves why he might pick this one. Of course we cannot know, but people smarter than me have pondered on this and come up with some fine thoughts.

Fire is beautiful. There's just something about fire, isn't there. Of course it has an important function. We all know about Prometheus and the quest to get fire. Without fire, campers die. Without heat, we cannot survive the dark nights. But here we are in 2007 in the first world, and I have central heating in my house, and I still have a fireplace. It's cozy and beautiful when I light it, but it's not really heating our house in any real way. We love fires.

But fire is also terrible. Those of us who have lived in Oklahoma know about how uncontrollable and frightening fires are. We know fire's attributes and tendencies but we cannot control it. It burns and it burns and it burns. You can't touch it even if you think it looks nice.

It is powerful in a way different than other things. God is a fire of judgment and consumption that cannot be controlled by you or me.

#### *God is holy*

The next thing Moses learns is that God is holy. So holy that Moses has to take off his shoes, the Ancient Near Eastern sign of respect and deference to a higher authority. Holiness means separation, set-apart-ness, uncommon, uniqueness. God calls him near, but not too near. There is a barrier between Moses and God, something that separates them from each other. Moses is afraid of God. He senses the "otherness" and it is not a pleasant thing.

This word for holy is the Hebrew word "qodesh" and it means weightiness. God's otherness is that of weightiness. How heavy is God for you? Do other things carry more weight than he does? If so, then he is not holy enough in your thought and life, though he is holy in reality.

#### *God's name is Yahweh*

As we continue in this amazing interaction between a man and God, we see Moses straight up ask the question, What is your name? This is the essence of asking Who are you?

What we start with is names. Do you know how incredibly awkward it is to be around someone for an extended period of time without knowing his or her name? Ugh.

Last week Emily Weisbook came to our house for games night. I know Emily Weisbook. I actually talked to Emily before she came to OU when she was a senior in high school in Columbia Missouri. Or I talked to her mother about her. I don't remember. Emily walks in the door and I say, "Kristen!" Not good when it's Emily.

Names are basic, foundational and of the essence of knowing someone. God tells us his name right here.

It's – well, we don't exactly know how to say it or even really write it. His name is Yahweh as best as we know. But what does it mean? It seems that Yahweh comes from the verb I am. So we read, I am who I am. Tell them I am sent you.

Friends, that is a strange name. You know strange-named people, I know. I was friends with a family in Ozark, Missouri, and here were there names: Dewey, Wannis, Satotha, Tawatha and LaRel. I have a friend named Sage Flower. I knew a guy who named his daughter Acorn.

God's name is a verb. A "to be" verb, in the present tense. What does this mean? We have to use words and concepts like self-determinant, autonomous, immutable, unchanging, not in the process of becoming something else, the same yesterday, today and forever. God is ever present, ever active, an interventionist for good. He is ever independent, and sovereign over all things. He is the inexhaustible god – we read here an assertion of divine sufficiency, an endless abundance yet to be tapped. We read here of the God of self revelation, the changeless and caring God, the promise-keeping God, the God of foreknowledge and patience, the God of power and sufficient resources, the God of victory and transformation. God tells Moses exactly what is going to happen and how it's going to go down. He is in charge of all that will transpire.

This holy God, this God of fire, inapproachable in his weightiness, is wearing a Hello My Name Is nametag. And on it is written, I am who I am. No one else has a name like that.

This God initiates. He is the God of our fathers. He has seen, heard, and he knows us. He will come down.

Do you know this God? Do you realize how holy he is? He is not to be trifled with. Have you ever sensed any sort of separation from him or do you treat him as your buddy, buddy friend? He is not a Beanie Baby. He is Fire. He is holy, holy, holy as Isaiah tells us the seraphim cry out. He is so big that you cannot comprehend him. He is so powerful that you cannot control him. He is so amazing that even his name is barely decipherable. He is not a past-tense God. He is now and forever will be now. Do you know him?

### ***Who Am I?***

Moses doesn't fully ask and answer the Who Am I? question in his twenties. God waits until he's in his eighties to drive this point home for him. But in the midst of this exchange Moses learns about himself. As he relates to and learns about who God is, Moses sees who he is in the process.

And it's not a pretty picture. Did you notice how Moses starts off pretty good. These are good questions. Who are you God? What is your name? Who shall I tell them sent me?

And Moses gets honest answers to his honest questions. We want to be all about honest questions here. Ask them humbly and confidently.

But we see a few other things about Moses and his process of self-learning. We see that he is *afraid*. He cannot stand confidently before a holy God. He is undone. This is the experience of every person who truly stands in the weightiness of greatness. Their flaws are exposed.

Standing in front of God brings out the worst in Moses. We'd like to think being in God's presence would bring out our greatness, but it brings out our failures. When you come to God, do you bring your accomplishments or your failures to him. Do you bring what your hands have done and present them to God? Or do you realize you've really done nothing after all.

Moses brings his whole life. And then he questions the authority, the plan and the call of God.

The exchange is almost comical in Moses' shrinking before what he has just seen and heard. And after all, you have to admit right, that it just doesn't seem to make sense.

Moses hears this: Okay, you want me to go back and talk to Pharaoh and have him release us so we can go worship. Right. Um, Yahweh. Have you been paying attention here?! I have been a shepherd for forty years! No one will listen to me!

God tells him the whole plan. God wants Moses to gather the elders together than tell them what he says. God believes in elders, in representative government and you should too. They are to go to the King of Egypt and tell him that they have to go worship. He won't let you. So I will work wonders to set you free. In fact, when you go free, you won't go empty handed but will take a ton of stuff with you, so you'll be set up for your new kingdom in the land of milk and honey.

You don't believe me, Moses? Here are signs and symbols so you can trust in what I'm telling you. It is true. These signs, like all signs are present persuaders that Moses has indeed been sent by the Lord, and they are future ratifications or confirmations that something said or done earlier.

Moses has seen all this and he's been thinking: Here I am, send someone else!<sup>4</sup> Moses is a failure. He's poor. He's a shepherd. He's been rejected by his people. He's insecure. He pleads incompetence. He has some sort of speech problem. He's freaked out. He's unfit and unwilling.

What does God do with this? What do you expect God to do? Some of you probably expect God to bend over and offer Moses a sucker. Maybe he can get a prize from the treasure box if he's brave like your dentist told you.

No, that's not what happens. The text says "The Lord became angry." But it actually says "The Lord's nostrils flared." It means the same thing, but it's a little more graphic when you read that God's nostrils flared in anger. He had had enough.

God says, "Moses! Who is in charge here! Yeah, you are not good enough – I know. But just as I can make you speak, I can make them listen! I am the one who makes people see. Who is the Lord after all, and it's not you. I will go with you. I will send your brother with you so you can have a partner. You are not alone. Don't forget your staff. You'll need it.

This takes some time. Moses does go, but he does so on God's time table. "The Lord has a training school. He says, 'Come into my presence.' Satan will, of course always seek to reverse that procedure, reminding us all the time of the needs of the world and of the desperate necessity to get on with the work. The Lord, however, is saying, 'Just wait a bit. I'm not in your sort of hurry. Come and linger in my presence.' Satan says, 'No, think of the needy world. There are souls to be saved' because he wants us to go out onto the battlefield unarmed. He does not mind one bit if we go out to the Lord's battles, provided that we have no hope of winning when we get there! But the Lord says, 'No, come and stand me for a bit. Come and listen to me.' Service begins in the presence of the Lord, spending time alone with God."<sup>5</sup>

So Moses asks What in the world? And he sees something that demands a new explanation. He asks Who are you? And he learns about God; in fact, he learns God's very character and his name. I am who I am. And he asks, Who am I? He

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<sup>4</sup> From Ryken

<sup>5</sup> Motyer, 63

learns that he is weak and frail in the sight of God. He learns that he has been called. He learns that God has called him in order to send him out.

That is God's pattern after all. Have you been called into God's presence? Have you asked these questions, wondered about your way of looking at things? Your religious ways of viewing the world will not work. If you think that you are basically good and therefore things will work out for you, then you will see that crumble before you. You will be like the lost older brother in the Prodigal Son story. He thought he was good. He thought he was righteous. But he was wrong. He was lost in his obedience, estranged from his father, angry and judgmental.

Or are you like the younger brother, stuck in the pigsty? Have you learned yet that if you get everything you want, that you very well may destroy yourself? Have you come to your senses and cried out for something to make sense?

Is God real and holy in your life? Can he tell you things about yourself that need to change? Can he make meaning for you?

Yes, he can. God shows himself here as a fire. He speaks in time and space. He is holy. He is Yahweh, I am who I am. He is the Lord of the Insecure. And here, after coming into God, Moses is sent out.

If you have been called in, if you have seen this Yahweh God, have you thought about where you might be sent out to? Have you considered how he might have sent you to Norman, to OU, to your dorm floor, to your sorority house, to your apartment complex, to your club or organization as a messenger from him?

I can't do it, you say. I don't know what to say, you think. I don't think it would work, you wonder.

And you are right. You can't. You don't. You won't.

But 2000 years ago, there was a man who stood before a group of people and he said something truly amazing. They were having an argument about Abraham, the father of the Jews, the father of faith. Jesus of Nazareth, a simple nobody from a backwards town, but a teacher gaining a following nonetheless, said to them something that implied that he had spoken with and known Abraham. Impossible! Jesus was 30 years old. Abraham lived 2000 years ago from that time.

Jesus had a reply. He answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am!" (John 8:58)

Did you hear him? He said, Even before 2000 years ago, I am. Friends, that just doesn't make sense. So he must have misspoke. Or they must have heard him wrong.

But the next verse goes this way: "At that point they picked up stones to throw at him." They knew what he meant. Jesus said that he is God. He claimed the name of God, I am who I am. He is the one who gave it up so that you might gain it all. He is the one who was cast out, so that you could be brought in. Your weakness is his strength.

You cannot reach anyone for Christ. But God can use you. He can speak through you. He can open hearts and eyes to believe and to see. He can open yours too.

Ask good questions, even of God. Take notice of strange things, odd coincidences in your life. Go and investigate them. Listen for the voice of God. Look for the Angel of the Lord, who is Jesus.

Awhile ago 16 year old boy was kidnapped in England and taken to Ireland as a slave. He hadn't been too interested in God before this, but finding yourself as a slave in a different country will sort of change some things for you. He worked as a shepherd and for six years he prayed 100 times a day and 100 times a night. He had a lot of time alone. He was cold, hungry and naked. He finally escaped and made it back to his own country, to his own people and family and he studied to become a priest.

One night, he had a dream. Someone he had known in Ireland brought him some letters and one of them was entitled The Voice of the Irish and at the end it said, We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.

Patrick couldn't resist. He wasn't a great priest. He wasn't an eloquent one, really. He didn't know much Latin, wasn't too proficient in any of the Celtic languages. But he went. He went to a pagan place, outside the borders of what had been the Roman empire. He went to the edge of the world and found cannibalism, druids and warfare.

And, slowly, that island was changed. People accepted the love of God in their lives. Patrick said that slavery was wrong – he was a former slave taken by these very people – and they stopped. He taught them to love the Scriptures, and they spent hours and hours copying any piece of writing they could get their hands on.<sup>6</sup> They established monasteries, abbots and the first towns in Ireland. Priests went out from there to Scotland, back to England and eventually onto the continent where Christianity used to be known but had been forgotten.

Think of it. Patrick left his home and went to a strange place. The place of his oppression and his captors and he went with the simple gospel on his lips. And God used him.

We sing of the Great I Am, Jesus who takes our need and gives us his strength. He is the one going before us. He conquers our enemies. He is able!

*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, Weak and wounded, sick and sore; Jesus, ready, stands to save you, Full of pity, joined with power. He is able, He is able; He is willing; doubt no more.*

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<sup>6</sup> Which is why Cahill says they altered the planet for good in *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

