

A Reluctant Servant, a Compassionate God

Exodus 3:7–4:17

I had my first job interview when I was fifteen-years-old. I sat down with Jim Clark, owner and manager of Jim's Foods, or more officially, the Aurora Mall, one of two grocery stores in our small town, but the one with a hardware department and video section (which apparently is what qualifies you to call yourself a "mall"). And for approximately three minutes, Jim asked me a few questions before offering me a job sacking groceries, the main question being whether I had a bike I could ride to work, or if I'd need my parents to drive me.

Even though it wasn't the most intimidating interview, being my first interview I was still pretty nervous. Will I say something stupid? Will I get the job? Will I do a good enough job if I get it?

But then, there are some job interviews when you find yourself beginning to worry not that you *won't* get the job, but that you actually will, and you're not sure you really want it any more. Maybe you realize you don't want to work with these people. Or you become insecure about your ability to perform the job, or what it will cost you to succeed here.

And so you actually start to sabotage your own interview. You start dropping hints about your lack of interest or availability, or ways that you're probably not a very good fit for the position. Try and get them to move on to someone else.

I remember when I was interviewing with Westgate. There was another church in the Chicago area that had approached me about the same time. Great church, godly people, but I wasn't really drawn to them the way I was drawn to Westgate. But the process kept moving forward, and soon it was moving faster than Westgate, and pretty soon I found myself sitting down with their search team for an interview, trying to figure out how to politely sabotage this thing, not because I didn't want to work with them, but Carissa and I were increasingly feeling a call to New England.

Well if you ever needed a model for how to sabotage your own job interview, let me submit to you Moses' example in Exodus 3 and 4.

This morning we return to our series through the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible, which tells the remarkable story not merely of how a small people group becomes a great nation, but of how *God saves his people for his glory*. The story begins with God fulfilling his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to multiply them and make them into a great nation (1:7). But while they have been living as refugees in Egypt, their growth is seen as a threat by the king of Egypt, and they find themselves enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.

But God has not forgotten his promises. Nor has he ignored his people. When we looked at the end of ch. 2 and the beginning of ch. 3 a few weeks ago, we saw a God who hears the cries of his people, who sees and knows their suffering, and who remembers his covenant. And this God reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush and calls him to lead his people Israel out of Egypt.

We're stepping back into that same story this morning, because the conversation between God and Moses at the burning bush really extends all the way to ch. 4:17. Last time we looked at the beginning of it, with a focus on the revelation of God's divine name. In this conversation with Moses, God takes the opportunity to reveal to us the meaning and significance of his self-chosen, proper name, Yahweh (or "the LORD" in all caps, as it's rendered in your Bibles). The name Yahweh is related to the Hebrew verb for "I AM." And we saw how God's name tells us something about who God is, specifically, who *he is* in this story—a *compassionate God who comes down to be with his people because he is committed to saving them and bringing them to where he wants them to be.*

As we come back to the story again and follow it through to the end 4:17, what I want to do this morning is focus now on Moses, the servant whom God calls to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, who really finds himself in the most overwhelming job interview in human history.

The Resume

Let's start with his resume. If you were to put an ad out for someone who's gifted and qualified and maybe experienced in leading a nation in what amounts to a revolution, Moses' does not exactly have the resume you're looking for. Despite his reputation as a pillar of ancient Israel, we learned in ch. 2 that had a pretty questionable start to his career. He spent the first 40 years of his life in luxury, being raised by the daughter of Pharaoh and sheltered from the slavery of his people. Then he spent his next forty years in obscurity, having been rejected by both Israel and Egypt, and resigning himself to settle down in Midian—a man without a people or a land.

And yet, despite his shady resume (and the fact that *he didn't actually apply for the job*), God calls Moses to the most important leadership role in ancient Israel's history. One day as he's going about his daily work of tending his father-in-law's sheep, God catches his attention through a miraculous sign (the burning bush), and tells him what he's going to do for his people and how he's going to do it through Moses.

The Job Description (3:7-10)

I want to pick up in ch. 3:7, with what we might call the job description. Here is God's plan for rescuing Israel from Egypt, and what role he wants Moses to play in it.

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." (3:7-8)

God has heard and seen his people, he knows their suffering, and he is coming down to rescue them from slavery and bring them to the land he promised to Abraham. That's his plan. So what does it have to do with Moses?

He elaborates on his plan in vv. 9-10. And notice how v. 9 echoes v. 7—God's compassion and care for his people: "I have surely *seen* the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their *cry* . . . And now, behold, the *cry* of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also *seen* the oppression . . ." (3:7, 9). So v. 9 echoes v. 7, which makes you wonder if vv. 8 and 10 also echo each other. And they do—they both discuss God's plan to *deliver* his people out of Egypt, with one significant difference. In v. 8, God says, "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians"; but in v. 10, he says "Come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

And what this parallel structure suggests is that v. 10 is interpreting v. 8: how is God going to come down to rescue his people? *By sending Moses*. God will come down to be with his people and deliver them from slavery by sending Moses. That's his job description. To represent God and accomplish his plan for rescuing his people from one of the most powerful and tyrannical kings in the known world.

So when we come to what we might call the "interview" in 3:11–4:17, it's not hard to see why Moses attempts to sabotage his own interview for a job he didn't apply for. You've got the wrong guy.

The Interview (3:11–4:17)

This section is punctuated with five objections that Moses offers in response to God's call. They range from honest, humble questions to a downright obstinate refusal. And they illustrate what is really a temptation for all of us: to think that our own insufficiency or inability thereby disqualifies us from serving and obeying God.

And yet to each of these five objections, what we're going to see is that while Moses is all over the map, God is steadfast in his plan and compassionate toward his reluctant servant, because what qualifies or enables Moses to accomplish this call is not what he brings to the table, but the presence of the LORD—the I AM—who promises to be *with* him.

1. The Question of Qualification (3:11-12)

His first objection comes in vv. 11-12, with the question of *qualification*. Moses reacts really how anybody should react when reading this job description: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). What do you want me for? What qualifies me?

The truth is that nobody's qualified for what God is calling Moses to. But of all people (we took a look at his resume earlier), Moses seems to be the least likely candidate. And he knows it. He's not even sure who this God is yet, as we'll see in a minute.

But God's answer to this first objection will essentially be his answer to the next four as well. Verse 12: "But I will be *with you* . . ." What qualifies Moses is not his own resume or experience

or leadership skills; what qualifies him is the presence of God with him. And more specifically, the presence of the I AM (the words translated “I will be” are the same word and form translated “I AM” in 3:14-15). When God calls a servant, he also qualifies them with his presence. And to assure Moses of his call, God even gives him a sign: “. . . and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” It’s a strange sign—one that will only become clear in retrospect. The confirmation of his call will come *after* his obedience to the call; it requires Moses to step out in faith. Faith that what qualifies him is the very presence of God.

2. The Question of Authority (3:13-22)

Moses, still trying to take in what’s being asked of him, realizes then that he’s lacking some critical information: just who am I representing? On whose authority am I to tell the Israelites to follow me? They don’t know me, and honestly, I don’t know you. Verse 13: “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

This is the question of *authority*. What authority does Moses have to tell the Israelites to follow him? He doesn’t really even know who this God is. He’s been disconnected from him—raised in an Egyptian household and then run out of town.

And again, this is where God took the opportunity to reveal to Moses not just what his name was, but what his name meant: I AM who I AM—a compassionate God who comes down to be with his people because he is committed to their salvation. That is at the heart of who God is. And because he is this kind of God, he tells Moses exactly what’s going to happen when he goes to Israel—that they will listen to his voice and believe him. They will recognize in Moses not his own authority, but God’s. When God calls a servant, he authorizes them to do his work. He even tells him what will happen when he asks Pharaoh to let Israel go—that he will not listen or recognize his authority, unless compelled by a mighty hand—God’s hand. “So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go” (3:20). God has the authority to compel Pharaoh to let his people go, and Moses comes to him based not on his own authority, but on God’s.

3. The Question of Credibility (4:1-9)

But Moses is not convinced. He’s not convinced that Israel will take him seriously. And so he raises the question of *credibility* in ch. 4:1-9. Look with me at v. 1: “Then Moses answered, ‘But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, “The LORD did not appear to you.”’”

God just *told* him that they would believe him. Moses’ objection here feels like stubborn unbelief. And he will reach that point before the conversation is over, but I don’t think he’s there yet. I think the idea that the people of Israel would believe him, that God appeared to him and sent him, after they haven’t seen him for 40 years, and last time they saw him, they rejected him—it’s unbelievable to Moses not in a stubborn way, but in an honest way. The thought that Israel would see Moses as credible is utterly incredible to him.

But when God calls a servant, he validates that servant. And so in his compassion, he addresses Moses' skepticism by offering him three signs he can use to demonstrate his credibility—that he really has been sent by God. Miraculous signs that demonstrate supernatural power; there's no sleight of hand here. First God turns his staff into a snake, and then back into a staff again. Then he makes his hand leprous, and then whole again. Then he tells him if neither of those signs are convincing, to take some water from the Nile and pour it onto the ground and it will become blood.

What's interesting is that Moses won't have to use any of these signs with Israel, though he will use two of them with Pharaoh. But his credibility, his validation, comes not from his own ability, but from the power and presence of God.

4. The Question of Ability (4:10-12)

Yet Moses is still bent on sabotaging his interview. He raises a fourth objection in 4:10-12, the question of *ability*. Verse 10: "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 want me to go and speak to Israel and then speak to Pharaoh and I can't not speak very good.

But Moses still doesn't get it. If what qualifies him, authorizes him, and validates him is not what he brings to the table but the very presence of God, then not even his poor speech is an obstacle to God. This is God's point in vv.11-12: "Then the LORD said to him, '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.'" And keep in mind that when God says "I will be" in v. 12, it's the exact same word and form as "I AM" back in 3:13-14: the *I AM* is *with* your mouth. When God calls a servant, he enables that servant with his very own presence.

The Question of Willingness (4:13-17)

Moses has run out of valid objections. All that's left is obstinacy and unbelief. And that's where he lands in vv. 13-17, and the final question of *willingness*. Verse 13: "But he said, 'Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.'" And here's where God's patience finally begins to wear thin. Verse 14: "Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses . . ." But notice that even in his disappointment and anger, his compassion has not run out: ". . . and 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" (4:14-15).

God accommodates for Moses' insecurity and inability, even his fear. He will provide Moses' brother Aaron to assist him. He promises his presence again—the I AM is *with* your mouth. But what's interesting is that he does not relieve Moses from his call. Not because God needs him, but because he *wants* to use him. He doesn't just send Aaron instead; he could have done that. But Moses is his man. And when God calls a servant, he expects him to trust and obey.

Answering the Call

So how will Moses respond? We'll find out as we move forward in the story next week. But what's clear this morning is that the effectiveness of God's call does not hang on the person called, but on the *presence* of the one who calls him. That's true for Moses. It's also true for us.

When we think about parallels between Moses' ministry and the call to gospel ministry today, it's not that we're called to lead a national revolution or oversee the migration of a people group, or to facilitate a covenant between God and his people. Moses' mission was unique. But we are called to be servants of God, all of us. To live all of life as an act of worship to him. And the heart of that call is to make disciples of all nations. To make the gospel of Jesus known, the good news of who he is and what he has done to establish God's kingdom and deal with our sin through his life, death, and resurrection. Whether you are a brand-new Christian, or a seasoned veteran, we all share in the mission of God to bring the good news of Jesus to bear on every part of life, for all people, everywhere.

And when we think about that call, it's not hard to find ourselves in a similar place to Moses. To think that our lack of experience or lack of knowledge somehow disqualifies us from serving God or answering his call. What if they ask me a question I can't answer? Or to think that our insufficiency or insecurity makes us a liability to God. I'm too sinful, too selfish for God to use me. It's really in everybody's best interest to sabotage my interview and just let people move on with someone else.

I remember a time when I was training for ministry during grad school and doing an internship at a church, and coming to a point where I realized I had no clue what I was doing or how I could ever help somebody walk with God. I had already been in ministry for five years, and it dawned on me that I don't have any answers. I don't know how to fix someone's marriage. I don't know how to help someone get free from bondage to sin. *I can't do it.* I'm going to have to figure out something else to do.

But here's the deal: the story of Moses' call is not just a story about what God did for Moses; it is the revelation of who God is and how he calls, qualifies, authorizes, validates, and enables his servants for the mission they are given. *And* how expects them to trust and obey. To answer the call. Not because of what we bring to the table, but because he is the God who is *with us*.

Just like Moses, none of us have a very impressive resume when it comes to serving the Lord. We're all sinful, selfish. Many of us are unimpressive by the world's standards. This is in fact Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 1:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.³⁰ *He* is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom *God* made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

What enables us to serve the Lord, to trust and obey him in his call, is not what we bring to the table. It's not about believing in yourself, or trying harder. It's not about reading the right books, or going to seminary (though those can be helpful). It's not even about following Moses' example. What enables us to serve the Lord is being united in the One who fulfilled Moses' example: the true and better servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

God said he would come down by sending Moses; in Jesus, God literally came down to deliver his people. Jesus didn't just represent God like Moses did. He didn't just speak *as* God or *like* God; he *is* God. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh that he might dwell with us, and that he might serve his Father by accomplishing all his will and saving us from our sin.

He is the only one who is truly qualified, authorized, validated, and able to accomplish God's plans because of what he brings to the table. And yet, like Moses, the Father still expected him to trust and obey. To follow through with their plan to show their love a fallen world. And he did so perfectly. The only person in history who perfectly served the will of the Father. Who became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8).

But just as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends us (Jn. 20:21). He calls us, qualifies us, authorizes us, validates us, and enables us—not because of who we are or anything we have to offer, but through our union with the perfect Servant, Jesus Christ. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.”

The gospel of Jesus is all we have. And it is enough. This is the only way that I am able to be in gospel ministry. When I went through that period of deep insecurity, and every time I've returned to that place since (which is relatively often), what God has reminded me each time, and what he reminds all of us this morning through this passage, is that what qualifies and equips us for serving him is not who we are or what we have, but who Jesus is and what he has already done on the cross.

Funny story. As many of you know, our dear brother Gerritt, who died this past week, was on the search team who brought me to Westgate five years ago. One of the first people we met in Boston. And at some point, either during the interview or after, he said to me, “You know. If we had received your resume through the mail, instead of coming from a trusted recommendation, it would have gone straight into the garbage.” There was nothing impressive about it. The only thing I had to offer then, the only thing I still have to offer today, *the only thing any of us have to offer* to a hurting world around us, *is who Jesus is and what he has done*—to take the suffering of this world and make it his own, to take the sin of this world—your sin and my sin, every evil and unkind thing we've thought, said, or done, or ever will think, say, or do—to take all of it and fold it into his suffering on the cross. To bear the full weight of God's holy anger against evil and sin, to exhaust the judgment in our place, that we might be saved. That we might be redeemed and reconciled to God and made new through the power of his resurrection, for any and all who place their faith and hope in him.

This is our only sufficiency as servants of God. This is our only hope for real and lasting change in the world. And it is enough. Whatever our fears, whatever insecurities, whatever objections

we might raise. ‘I’m too busy—who will watch all these sheep? I’m too sinful—God could never accept me, let alone use me.’ However we might try to sabotage our interview, one by one Jesus strips them away, until we realize that the only thing we have is the one thing that matters—the presence of God through Jesus Christ. When God calls a servant, he qualifies them, authorizes them, validates them, enables them, and expects them to trust and obey.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor. 3:4-6)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. What is the most memorable excuse you’ve ever heard from someone trying to get out of something they’re supposed to do?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What can we say about the context of this passage? (What’s happening beforehand that helps us understand what’s being said here?)
3. How does God describe the task he is calling Moses to in 3:7-10? Why do you think Moses is so hesitant to go?
4. What are some of the specific objections Moses offers in response to God’s plan?
5. How does God respond to each of Moses’ objections? Do you see any repeated ideas or themes in his responses?
6. How would you summarize what we learn about serving God in this story?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. How do you think the call to serve God today relates to the story of Moses’ call in Exodus 3-4?
8. How does Jesus’ life of servanthood relate to both Moses’ call and our call?
9. What are the main objections you are personally tempted to raise when it comes to your call to make disciples for Christ? Why do you think they are such a big deal to you?
10. How might God’s responses to Moses speak to your situation?