

Hebrews 11:23-29
(Exodus 3:1-15)
“By Faith Moses Endured, Seeing the Invisible God”

Introduction

Among the questions great and small that haunt us throughout our lives, none is greater than the bedrock questions of our own identity and of the identity of God. In fact, the greatest thinker of the reformation, John Calvin, opened his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” But how are we to know God? And how are we to understand ourselves? After all, aren’t both identities social constructs, given by the family culture into which we are born, and either reinforced or challenged by our education and life experience?

Interestingly, the Bible does not philosophize about such things. Rather, it reports the experiences of those who have encountered the living God in the midst of human history. It depicts a God who is not the end result of a line of philosophical inquiry, but who acts in the midst of human affairs, calling now this person, now that one, to come and follow, to do his work, speak his words, and lead his people on toward that great city with foundations that he has prepared for those who love him more than they love this present age.

The author of Hebrews gives in brief outline the four great movements of Moses’ life: a time of preparation (11:23), a time of choosing (11:24-26), a time of perseverance (11:27), and a time of obedience (11:28-29). Yet the key to understanding all these stages in Moses’ spiritual development is found in his own account of his first terrifying, life transforming encounter with God on Mt Sinai. In Exodus 3, we find Moses reflecting back on his own story, and he tells it in a fascinating way that says as much in its silence as in its words.

The name *Exodus* is from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but in the Hebrew Bible it is known by its opening words: *These Are The Names*. Chapter two opens with the birth-story of this greatest man of the old covenant, greater even than Father Abraham. Yet in this book entitled, *These Are The Names*, we are not told the names of the baby or his parents or his sister, or of the daughter of the unnamed Pharaoh who drew him up out of the water. This should be as striking to any reader of Scripture as it certainly was to Moses’ original audience. Genesis is thick with names and genealogies. Other birth narratives are rich with names, telling us immediately who are the parents, and even what the child is to be named. But this account is unique. Only when Pharaoh’s daughter names him Moses do we have our first clue as to the meaning of the silences in Moses’ account of his birth.

The name, we are told, sounds like the Hebrew for “draw out,” but Pharaoh’s daughter spoke the language of Egypt, and gave him, not a Hebrew name, but a name common to her people (as in Tuthmosis and Ahmose, Son of Tuth and Son of Ah). In her tongue, Moses was equivalent to the Hebrew name “Ben,” which means “son of,” as in Ben Asher (Son of Asher), or Benjamin (Son of the Right Hand). However, the name Moses never stood alone: it needed something else, a father’s name or a descriptive name that gave it meaning. By itself it is indeterminate. It simply means, “Someone’s Son.” He is quick to point out to his audience (of Hebrew speakers who had spent their lives as slaves in Egypt, and knew that “Moses” was an incomplete Egyptian name) that it does also have meaning in Hebrew by sounding like the word for “draw out,” an appropriate meaning for one who was drawn out of the river. But the key is this: He is a man in search of identity whose own name does not help him know whether he is Hebrew or Egyptian, whether his destiny is tied to the people of his birth, or of his adoption. It gives added poignancy to Moses’ own struggle as he asks, “Who am I? Who are my people? Even my name cannot help me understand myself.”

These two most basic questions are at the heart of Moses’ encounter with God, and reach a climax in the verses we have read. Look with me as this one who would become the first great redeemer of God’s people describes for us the way he came to understand both who he was, and who God is.

Body

1. “Who am I?” (Exodus 3:11)

What happens when we try to answer that question for ourselves?

Moses’ attempts to redeem God’s people in his own strength are disastrous. He resorts to violence, killing an Egyptian who is abusing an Israelite slave. Encouraged by what he thinks is his success, he tries to mediate between two Israelites, only to discover that his effort to save his people is not appreciated, and has put him in harm’s way. When Pharaoh discovers what he has done, Moses flees for his life. (2:11-15). He is forty years old, and his grand plan to save his people has been dashed. He flees in disgrace.

It was only after Moses had been humbled that he was ready for God to use. Only after he had given up any idea of redeeming God’s people in his own strength, according to his own plan, was Moses ready for God to use. Only after going from the palace to the backside of the desert, where he kept the flocks of his Father-in-law for another forty years, was he capable of the humility and wonder necessary to give God all glory and praise. At eighty years of age, he finally is ready for God to make him great. God only seems to use broken people to accomplish great things.

You and I also must learn that apart from the grace of God, we cannot accomplish anything great for him, and will only end up fleeing from the enemy of our souls.

What happens when God begins to answer that question for us?

It begins when we turn aside to consider what he has done. We may not yet know that it is God at work or what he is up to, but we turn aside from the business of life to ask, "What this is thing? I must turn aside to consider it." (3:3). Where might you be walking past burning bushes in your life? As Elizabeth Barrett Browning has written, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes." The author of Hebrews writes that by faith Moses "endured as seeing him who is invisible" (11:27). There is the key to enduring faith: seeing what is visible only to faith, and holding fast to the vision.

It becomes more intense when we realize that God is calling us to draw near to him, and rather than running away, we take off our shoes and bow low before him in worship, attentive to him alone. Worship is the great prerequisite for world-transforming service.

It finally happens when we place our very identity before him and ask, with Moses, "Who am I that you should speak to me?" (3:11). Others may consider you great, may affirm your gifts, and tell you who you are. But you will never really know your true self, your true name, until God reveals it to you.

Calvin's point is made when God answers Moses' question by saying, "But I will be with you" (3:12). We will never know who we are meant to be until we understand that our true identity is linked to our relationship with the living God. If God is with me, then I am not afraid to know who I was created to be, and what I am called to do. The point is this: We belong to God, and he will be with us to the very end.

2. "Who are you?" (Exodus 3:13)

But that invites the question: Who is this God who says that he will be with me?

He is the God of our Father Abraham, and of Isaac and Jacob. He is God who created the heaven and the earth, and who prepares people such as Moses through great travail of soul to lead his people out of bondage and into the glorious light of his presence, on pilgrimage to the land of promise and to the city of the Great King: Zion, the city of our God. Thus he has been known.

But now he reveals his covenant name, a name to be spoken only by his covenant people, a name that points toward the mystery of his being the source of all that exists, the only self-sufficient source of all that is: "I AM WHO I AM" (3:14).

It is a raw assertion of his authority and power, against which the rulers and authorities of Egypt are as nothing. The most powerful nations have no power beyond that granted them by God, and if they continue to resist him, he will do to them what he has done to Egypt, Rome, and in our time to both the Nazi and the communist empires.

It is, in truth, a conversation stopper. It is illegitimate to expect God to explain himself to us, beyond what he so graciously shows us by acting on our behalf in human history. So he simply says, "My name is ineffable as I am ineffable. I am, and I will be with you, and that is enough for you to know, enough for you to set out with me on pilgrimage, and to trust me to keep you, to supply and provision you, to do through you and for you all that I have promised, and to lead you to your journey's end in safety."

Conclusion

Have you yet seen the fields aflame with God? Does he burn and beckon you from the city buildings and alleyways? Have you turned aside to hear him speak? Do you know your true name, or his? Or are you still in the land of Midian, thinking that your life is over, your dreams dead, your best days behind you? Turn aside to see this thing that God is doing, right here on this hillside, right in your home, your neighborhood, your classroom, your workplace. Take off your shoes, bow low and worship, as he tells you who you are, and who he is.

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