

PM Exodus 4 I am weak, but He is strong

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Preacher: Mr Michael Topple

- [0 : 00] Our reading from God's Word tonight comes from the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 4, where we can read from page 56, Exodus chapter 4, and we read the whole of the chapter, page 56 in the Church Bibles.
- Just by way of a preparation as we read this verse, we are only a short way into the book of Exodus.
- We have seen how the Lord has blessed the people of Israel, particularly in the face of the attempted infanticide.
- We've seen how Moses was born and how he fell into the safekeeping of the daughter of Pharaoh. And in chapter 3, see how God appeared to him in the burning bush, which burned yet was not consumed.
- And so we pick up the story in chapter 4. 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.
- [1 : 18] The Lord said to him, What is that in your hand? He said, A staff. And he said, Throw it on the ground. So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it.
- But the Lord said to Moses, Put out your hand and catch it by the tail. So he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand.
- But they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you. Again, the Lord said to him, Put your hand inside your cloak.
- When he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then God said, Put your hand back inside your cloak.
- So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. If they will not believe you, God said, or listen to the first sign, that they may believe the latter sign.
- [2 : 32] If they will not believe even these two signs, or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile, and pour it on the dry ground.
- And the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground. But Moses said to the Lord, O 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 tongue. 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. But he said, O my Lord, please send someone else.
- Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, 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.
- [3 : 47] But 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.

He shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs. Moses went back to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive.

And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.

So Moses took his wife and his sons, and had them ride on a donkey. And he went back to the land of Egypt, and Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

[5 : 03] Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son. And I say to you, Let my son go, that he may serve me.

If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son. At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met him and sought to put him to death.

Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me. So he let him alone.

It was then that she said a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. The Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.

And Moses told Aaron all the words of which he had been sent to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel.

[6 : 12] Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed. And when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel, and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped.

This is God's word, friends, and we pray that he will bless it as we seek to study it, and learn more of him from it. As I said this evening, we turn to Exodus chapter 4.

I gave a very brief rundown of what had gone before. But we can see in chapter 3 how God revealed himself as the covenant God.

I am who I am, he says. And he revealed himself as well as the people of Israel's deliverer. We saw how God appeared out of a bush, a burning bush, which burned and yet was not consumed.

We can remember Moses' great awe, and probably no small amount of trepidation, as he struggled to comprehend God. For in saying that he was, I am who I am, he was describing himself as self-defining, as self-existing, as unchanging and transcendent and self-revealing.

[7 : 41] All very big words describing God, basically saying that he is beyond our wildest imagination. And of course, we can remember how, while God revealed himself as the covenant God, the Lord Jesus Christ is the true fulfilment of the great covenant, greater even than simply securing Israel's freedom.

The Lord Jesus secured new life and the forgiveness of sins by dying for sins which he had not committed to save those who had.

And so this evening we turn to chapter 4. And in so doing, we'll consider two themes that run through the passage. The title of the sermon is, I am weak, but he is strong.

And I hope you'll understand why as we go through. Because the two truths that we must know first of all are that God is all-sufficient. And secondly, that we have received a call to obedience and faith in our home or private lives.

So, Exodus chapter 4. Well, as I said, we can recall a bit of chapter 3. Many of you will have no doubt read chapter 3. But if we just look back, we will see that from about halfway through, from verse 13 of chapter 3, Moses begins to try and get out of the commandment.

[9 : 14] The Lord says, you will go and do this. And Moses says, well, if I go to the people of Israel and say this, they'll say, who are you? And proceeds, proceeds, sorry, to offer reasons that he is unable to do as the Lord commands.

Now, if we were being charitable, we could say that these concerns, which he raised in chapter 3, are very legitimate.

After all, it is important that people know that we have strong backing whenever we do something. And yet, as we progress into chapter 4, I think you will agree with me that Moses' challenges to what the Lord tells him to do, Moses' reasoning for not being able to do these things, seem to get less and less valid and more and more desperate.

Moses is unhappy with God's answers, even though God routinely, continually says, don't worry, it'll be fine, don't worry, it'll be fine, don't worry, I am with you.

Cleverly, though, Moses at no point says, I'm not doing this, as maybe Jonah did as he jumped into the boat and tried to flee.

[10 : 31] And yet still, throughout the passage, we can see how unhappy Moses is with the task he has been set. Even though the Lord assures Moses, right at the end of chapter 3, that using the divine name Yahweh will be enough, Moses still doubts.

And so, in chapter 4, we see that the Lord continues to try to calm Moses' nerves. He provides him with three signs, three promises.

Chapter 4, verse 3, we see Moses instructed to throw his staff to the ground and it becomes a serpent, which, when he goes to pick it up, returns to being a staff.

In chapter 4, verse 6, we see Moses' hand, he's instructed to place his hand into his cloak and when he removes it, it has turned leprous or very white.

And then again, putting it back in and taking it out, returns it to normal. And then lastly, there is the promise that if he takes some water from the Nile and throws it on the ground, it will turn to blood.

[11 : 47] Now, all of these signs have meanings and connotations and so I propose that we look at them each in turn. But before we do so, let's observe the big point that God is sovereign.

Now, this morning I was talking to the children about kingship and in particular about how Jesus is our king and we may, of course, when we think of sovereign, think of King Charles or his late mother, the Queen.

And yet, God's sovereignty is greater still because God has absolute control over everything. The king is a constitutional monarch as we know.

He cannot just go around deciding that people with red hair should be taxed more than people with grey hair. Instead, things have to be done through a parliament. The king's power is limited.

God's power is unlimited. He has absolute control over everything. We can remember right back in Genesis that just through speaking the words he called the universe into creation.

[12 : 52] Let there be light and there was. Later on in the book of Exodus we see how God exercised through Moses parts the Red Sea.

Another sign of God's control over creation allowing the people of Israel to escape from Egypt. I hope that isn't a spoiler for you but they do eventually get out. Then later on we can see how God through Jesus Christ has control over creation as he calms the storm.

Therefore it is important for us to remember that God is sovereign over created order. And it is remembering this that we look at the first five verses of our reading.

And we'll begin at verse 2. The Lord said to Moses what is that in your hand? He said a staff. And so the Lord said throw it on the ground. So he threw it on the ground and it became a serpent and Moses ran from it.

But the Lord said to Moses put out your hand and catch it by the tail. So he put out his hand and caught it and it became a staff in his hand. That the Lord continues they may believe that the Lord the God of their fathers the God of Abraham the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has appeared to you.

[14 : 17] Here Moses is shown to cast his staff to the ground and it turns into the serpent. The only time before this that we see a serpent in the scriptures is in the garden of Eden.

And we can remember that at that point the serpent is the epitome of evil and sin slithering into mankind spoiling God's created order.

And yet here the Lord is seeing fit to use a serpent not as an image of evil but rather as a sign as an illustration of his power. No longer was the serpent a cause of death and spiritual decay.

It was instead used by God to show his power to lead his people to freedom. We can also see another example of this in the book of Numbers.

Turn with me if you will to Numbers chapter 21. Numbers 21 from verse 4. 4. By this point the people were walking in the wilderness but they were becoming impatient.

[15 : 35] They were grumbling. They were complaining. And so the Lord acts. We can read from verse 4. So Numbers 21 at verse 4.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses.

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we loathe this worthless food. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people.

And they bit the people so that many of the people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said we have sinned for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people and the Lord said to Moses make a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live.

[16 : 44] So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if the serpent bit anyone he would look at the bronze serpent and he would live.

Here we see that the bronze serpent on the pole was given by God as the antidote to the venom of the snakes who were slithering among God's people.

And of course this image of something being raised up on high as a cure for sin and spiritual decay is what we will later see on the cross of Calvary.

God continually uses the worst things or situations or people for his glory. We see it in how he uses the serpent as one of the signs by which Moses is able to secure the freedom of the people of Israel.

We see it again as I said when the serpent is raised up on a pole and ultimately we see it in surely the greatest miscarriage of justice in the history of the world when the Lord Jesus dies for our sins.

[17 : 55] So having shown Moses the serpent God offers Moses another example. Interestingly throughout this reading we have a back and forth between God and Moses.

God tends to say something, Moses challenges it, God says something, Moses challenges it. But on this occasion God doesn't give Moses a chance to answer back. As soon as he's shown him the serpent he goes straight on to the next thing, the leprosy.

From verse 6, Again the Lord said to him, Put your hand inside your cloak. And he put his hand inside his cloak and when he took it out, behold his hand was leprosy like snow.

Then God said, Put your hand back inside your cloak. So he put his hand back inside his cloak and when he took it out, behold it was restored like the rest of his flesh.

If they will not believe you, God said, or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter. As in so many other places in scripture, we don't know exactly what this leprosy consisted of.

[19 : 06] Generally leprosy described one of many skin diseases or skin conditions. And yet the leprosy we know of today, the charity Lepra, for example, the people who deal with it, we think are very different to the leprosy that is seen in the Old and New Testaments.

Whatever the medical condition though, here we have yet another proof that God is sovereign over creation to the point that he is sovereign even over disease and sickness.

And this will become even more apparent as we reach the plagues of Egypt. Now for us readers who are looking at this passage from the other side of the cross of Jesus, we can maybe see the relevance.

We can understand why God chooses at this point to show Moses that he is in control over human sickness. But if you are Moses, still standing, we can only assume, by the burning bush, with the Lord showing you that he is able to turn your hand leprosy and not, Moses may well have wondered quite what this proved.

However, when the time came for Moses to present his case before Pharaoh, when the time came to threaten him with the sickness plagues, you can imagine that this memory will have returned to Moses' mind.

[20 : 33] He will have remembered that God had already shown him that he is able to fulfil these threats. Leprosy, sickness, all under God's control.

We can see other examples of leprosy being in God's hands, indeed sickness in general. maybe you will remember the healing of Naaman, 2 Kings chapter 5 verse 1.

The mighty commander, a great man, and yet plagued with this skin condition, seeks the prophet who tells him just to go and bathe in the Nile, and he had been expecting something far more miraculous than this to heal him, but no, bathe in the Nile is the instruction, and when he comes up, he is healed.

We see also when the prophet's servant tries to make a quick bit of money on this, he inherits the very sickness that had just been taken away from the great commander.

Then, of course, we can see scattered throughout the Gospels how Jesus himself has authority, has power, not just over leprosy, but over a great number of human conditions.

[22 : 04] Nothing is beyond God's strength. Even the things that afflict us that we have no control over, we can trust that the Lord is in control.

And lastly, the blood. We've considered the leprosy, we've considered the serpent. What about the Nile water thrown on the ground?

Well, arguably, this was not a sign, rather it was more of a promise. The first two were demonstrated to Moses, throw your staff on the ground, put your hand in your cloak, and yet this one, Moses had to take on trust, because another tool for Moses was to make use of the water changing into blood.

Now, blood, we know, is a symbol of life. It would play a massive part in the first plague in chapter seven, and also in the Exodus itself.

The relationship in the Hebrew concept between blood and life is seen to the point that Jews may not eat the blood of animals. They have to be slaughtered and ritually cleansed before they can eat them, because it would be seen as eating the animal's life blood.

[23 : 21] At the Exodus, the people painted the lintels of their doors with this blood, as a sign to God, to God's angel.

Again, as with the other two, this sign, or this promise of a sign, shows that God has power over created order, over life and death itself.

This, in turn, would become very relevant moment, when the final plague is promised, when the death of the firstborn is announced, and when the people are instructed to paint their homes as a sign to the angel.

So let's just take a step back for a moment and we can consider all this. Moses is very unsure of himself and his abilities. Time after time, in chapter 4 and in a bit of chapter 3, he questions God's plan.

And time after time, the Lord offers him signs as a reassurance. We know that Moses wrote Exodus.

[24 : 34] The Lord Jesus tells us that the first five books of the Bible are the books of Moses. And so, we can only understand from that that Moses wanted people to know just how uncertain he was when he took his great commission from the Lord.

He deliberately left these bits in the scriptures to teach us something. So what do they teach us and what would they have taught the people of Israel?

Well, I don't know about you, but I think it shows a very scared man who did not think that he was up to the task. And it also shows a very patient and yet powerful God.

God. So as we read this, we should remember that Moses, as great as he was, was also a flawed and scared individual. As flawed and scared as you and I can be.

He was beset with doubt and fear. And yet time after time the Lord reassured him. Time after time the Lord says, my strength more than makes up for your weakness.

[25 : 43] weakness. This is useful for us to remember, but it would have been even more useful for the people of Israel as they stood waiting to enter the promised land, being reminded that even great Moses was scared and that the Lord provided for him.

We can then turn to the next bit of the chapter, just verses 10 to 11. Moses said to the Lord, O 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 tongue.

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? You see, even though the Lord had given him these signs, still Moses was frightened.

This time though, the Lord responds in a different way. He doesn't just offer him more signs, he does something else. You see, Moses is, by all accounts, a man of few words and he now worries that he will stammer before Pharaoh, that he will be tongue-tied and I know this feeling quite well because from about the age of 19 I had a dreadful stammer and I feared having to speak in public.

Even now at times this stammer can re-emerge. Now it's difficult to silence me but at the time it was quite debilitating. And yet here, as with Moses' other complaints, the Lord reassures.

[27 : 25] Moses says, I can't possibly speak in front of Pharaoh, I'm not very well spoken. And yet the Lord comes back to him. Maybe you've seen the pattern. Moses says, I can't do it.

God says, I can. Moses says, I can't do it. God says, I can. Moses says, I can't do it. God says, I can. Moses says, I can't do it. And as we will later see, God says, Aaron can.

I'll provide him. Each time Moses worried that he wasn't strong enough or capable, the Lord shows him that only God's strength matters. Now this may remind us of Jesus' encouragement to his followers.

Matthew chapter 10 at verse 19, where we can read the great encouragement to his people.

When they deliver you over, Jesus said, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that very hour.

[28 : 30] You see, friends, it was not in Moses' strength that he had to do these things, but in God's. The children's son, that maybe some of you will know, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong.

Sadly, however, and perhaps understandably, Moses still worries about his speech, and it's at this point that Moses writes, verse 14, then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and he says, 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. God's patience by this point is beginning to wear thin, and maybe you can understand it.

I'm sure you will have had similar experiences trying to encourage somebody, and they're just not taking the encouragement, and you end up almost running out of ways to encourage them, and so you just say, just do it.

And so the Lord provides help. Just as God had revealed himself to Moses in the wilderness, so he says, is that not Aaron, your brother? Aaron, says God, will be your mouthpiece.

[29 : 49] Don't worry Moses, I've still called you for this task, but I'm going to give you somebody to help you. You can delegate bits to Aaron. You see, friends, the passage thus far has shown us that our human weaknesses should not stand in the way of us carrying out the Lord's commandment.

They should not stand in the way of our obedience. Yes, you and I are weak. Yes, yours and my sin makes us unworthy. Yes, the jobs that the Lord calls us to are so often impossible for man.

But as long as we stay in the mindset of thinking I'm not strong enough, we will never be able to obey, we will never be able to be obedient.

When the Lord pulls us to a task, we have to trust that he will provide, that he will give us a way to obey, that he will offer us the strength to do it.

Now, if you were an Israelite standing on that plateau looking out across the promised land, if you could see all the foes that you would have to overcome, all the giants, all the people that you would have to rout, you would probably be quite nervous.

[31 : 05] And so wouldn't it be an encouragement for you to know that however small and insignificant and weak you are, the Lord is your strength, the Lord will provide.

God's God's God's God's God's God's instruction because from verse 18 we see Moses setting off to return to the land.

They gather their possessions, they go to Jethro to seek his permission to leave, and they set off for Egypt. Here again we can see God acting and helping because Jethro does not stand in Moses' way when he says please can I go.

Instead he just says go be blessed. We can also see how in an apparent nod to the Gospels the Lord says to Moses go back to Egypt, this is verse 19, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.

That phrase will be familiar to us because it is said the other way round to Joseph when Jesus, Mary and Joseph had been hiding in Egypt to escape King Herod.

[32 : 23] That time though they were to leave Egypt and return to Jerusalem. Having prepared Moses, having built him up, having charged him with a great task, verses 24 to 26 in our reading, may seem a little confusing to us.

Let's just revisit them. At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and sought to put him to death.

Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me. So she let him alone.

It was then that she said a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. Now I hadn't realised until the other day, but the reason that Zippo lighters, I thought Zippo lighters, is because Zipporah used a flint.

That's just a little aside that I hadn't realised until recently. But yes, why did the Lord seek Moses' life? Why would he have wanted to put to death the very person who he had just spent a lot of time encouraging to do a job?

[33 : 46] Well the answer is fairly simple. Moses' home life did not mirror his public life. Hence our second point, God's call to obedience and faith in our home and private lives.

You see, way back in Genesis chapter 17, the Lord had made a covenant with Abraham. He had instituted the practice of circumcision. setting apart Jewish men for the Lord.

To this day it remains an essential part of Jewish identity. And while the New Testament shows us that we are no longer bound as Christians to follow that particular practice, Abraham and the people who came after him but came before Christ were required.

We know from Exodus chapter 2 that Moses' father was from the house of Levi, as was his mother. Levi was the priestly line, and so we can assume that he was circumcised as a child, and yet for some reason he hadn't circumcised his son.

This is why we have the big interruption in the text, verses 24 to 26, because Moses had not been obedient in his home life. Yes, he has set out for Egypt.

[35 : 06] Yes, he has done what the Lord had told him through the burning bush, and yet he had not fulfilled the big requirement of every Jewish parent, the circumcision of their son.

How could Moses be God's messenger or agent when he disregarded the commandment? It would be like if you had a minister who stood in front of you and said, oh yeah, I never pray, I never read the Bible.

how could he stand here and preach to you if he didn't do that? How could Moses lead the people out of Egypt if he wasn't even obedient in the home?

Now, we don't know whether Moses had refused to baptise, to circumcise the child, or whether it was some sort of oversight, but we do know that Zipporah, his wife, moved faster than he did.

She circumcised the lad, and God's anger was abated. You and I may be able to think of examples where public figures have been brought down through something in their family or their private life.

[36 : 10] These downfalls are very rarely about faith matters, admittedly, but we all know that such revelations can lead us to distrust the person who they speak of.

In his instruction to Timothy about appointing elders, Paul says, if somebody does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?

1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 5. It's an important question, because Moses clearly hadn't. Fundamentally, it's an important question for us all.

Do we have home lives, family lives, private lives that honour God? Or do we put on a virtuous display on the Lord's day to make out that all is well?

You and I are not Moses' friends, thank God for that, but we all know how important it is to live lives worthy of the name Christian.

[37 : 07] And so tonight's passage shows us two essential truths that Moses clearly wanted the people to know, and equally that the Lord wants us to know.

Firstly, that God has absolute control. He made you just as you are. whatever your condition, your strength, your ability, your disability, whatever it may be, if he gives you a task or a ministry, take heart that you can do it not in your own limited strength, but rather in his abundant strength.

And know too, at surface level, Sunday Christianity is not what God calls us to. to honour and obey God on the Lord's day does not excuse you and me the responsibility of living Christian lives, of nourishing ourselves and our families throughout the week.

Family worship, private prayer, Bible study, acts of charity and kindness, this is what God calls us to seven days a week, not just one. Moses lightly wrote Exodus toward the very end of his life and what we have as chapter four would have encouraged the people of Israel in these things through the reading and the studying of his word tonight.

It is my prayer that we may be encouraged too. Let us pray. Grant, O God, that these lessons from your word may abide in our hearts and minds and bring forth fruit in our lives.

[38 : 48] Increase within us faith, hope and love, that with carefully keeping your commandments we may be constant in our obedience. And grant, O Father, that when our life's work is ended, that we may find welcome and rest in the home eternal where your loved ones ever live to glorify you.

we ask these and all of our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Our concluding item of praise tonight, friends, is Psalm 93 from Sing Psalms, found at page 100.

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