

The Almighty and the Unlikely

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[0 : 00] Good evening to you. It's good to be joining in worship here with you and to share God's word with you this evening. The title I've given to the message this evening is the Almighty and the Unlikely.

In this passage of scripture that we just read earlier, we see how prayer works in that God's people, oppressed under slavery in Egypt, cry out to the Lord in their distress.

He hears, he responds because he's a compassionate God, but his response is by calling upon an individual who is seemingly in the middle of nowhere, out in the desert of Midian. Old in years, one time prince, now become a shepherd, living in obscurity. And it is wondrous, really, to see the providence of the Lord, his calling, his equipping. And I hope from what I share this evening, it will give us fresh encouragement that the Lord can use any one of us as a sense of our own availability. So we're going to be looking at this passage and Moses' response to the sense of calling and how apparent that he is on a rescue mission to deliver Israel from the clutch of the Egyptian powerhouse.

When God calls us to serve, it's not in our own strength. And it's like a two-sided coin. On the one side we have the symbol of God and all his might, his majesty, his holiness, his otherworldliness, and all that power that is available to change anything that he has made in creation.

He is Lord over it all. And he doesn't need us to do his work, but he chooses to operate so often through ordinary individuals like ourselves.

[2 : 25] So on the other side of this coin, we have a picture of Moses, an old man, as we indicated, a shepherd. Very fallible sort of person, full of doubts, and really not prepared or ready or willing to heed the Lord's call.

But this coin has extraordinary power because when the two operate together, when we, the servants of the Lord, are dependent upon his grace, his compassion, his power to convict and turn people's hearts back to him, then when we serve with that dependence, that looking to him, it is our most effective coin.

So here we're looking at a partnership that the work of the gospel is working step in step with God's spirit.

According to his will and his word, when we take our eyes off the Lord, we find ourselves easily unequal to the task.

We shirk back from it. And that perhaps explains some of Moses' initial reaction. He's thinking, who am I to go and speak to Pharaoh? But first and foremost, we start here in chapter 3 because it begins with an encounter with the Holy One.

[4 : 08] It's an awesome encounter. We'll just read in verse 2. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.

He looked and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. At the start of Moses' calling is this deep encounter with the otherworldliness of God, his purity, his one who is burning, and yet he does not consume that which he is burning.

It is a picture of something of his glory, his majesty. This brings to Moses that this is an unmistakable encounter.

It's confronting him with the holiness and the awesome nature of the Lord God. And the outworking of this encounter, it is for a purpose.

There's a mission, and we'll just put it under big headlines. The mission is to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt.

[5 : 28] The promise in this mission being accomplished is that God will go with him. It's not by human strength or might persuasion, but it's going to be by a demonstration of God's power and his spirit.

And we see latterly, as we will dip into chapter 4, Moses' own response of both fear and doubt. So, just under the first heading, I want to put before you that God's concern is our concern.

If we look at verse 7, 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. God is not indifferent. He's not standing back, indifferent to pain, but he's one who sees, waiting for a moment to act decisively.

We see that he is a God of compassion, concerned about their suffering. Then in verse 8, I have come down to deliver them out of the hands 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, and so on.

[7 : 01] And so there comes, along with this compassionate nature, a plan to deliver, to rescue his people, to redeem them from their slavery, to subdue the might of the superpower of this day, Egypt, and to bring his people out of that land and into a land of fullness and plenty.

It's a lovely picture of the Christian life, that we are redeemed from the slavery of sin, where our master is Satan, living under a kingdom of darkness, and we, through God's strength, are brought out of that into a kingdom of light, into the plentiness and fullness of the Spirit of God.

And that work is accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ. So it is, in a way, a foretaste of a bigger picture that will be worked out in fullness of time.

And back in verse 9, as we take up the reading again, And now behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, says the Lord, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppressed them.

By this time, Moses must have been feeling glad that, after all, these are his people left in slavery. Moses, at one time, was in that land.

[8 : 31] He, in his own strength, tried to rescue his people when he was virtually the adopted prince of Egypt. But, as we know from the scriptures, you know, it resulted in the murder of one man, and then the flight of Moses into Midian.

And, so we know that, at one time, Moses was concerned for his people. That he wanted to try, seek to rescue them. But, his way was not God's way.

And now God is saying, I'm here to act. I've heard, I've seen, I'm going to deliver them. I'm going to bring them out. And, Moses must have been feeling good about God's intervention at this moment.

And then we get to verse 10. And this must be something of a bombshell to Moses. Because the Lord says to him, Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.

It must have been a very sobering moment for Moses to suddenly be thought that he is going to be the catalyst, the instrument in God's hand to bring about the persuasion of Pharaoh to let go of the people and to bring them into the promised land.

[10 : 04] And, as we noted earlier, we see God operating in response to the cries and the pleas and the prayers of God's people under slavery.

He's responded, he's personally involved, and we furthermore see that we, as God's people, are also potentially the answer to God's plan of redeeming those that are caught under slavery.

I want to illustrate this talk with just one or two examples.

And, this here, I want to introduce you to Fiona Christie, known to some of you. Her parents were free church missionaries formerly in Peru and then latterly in South Africa.

And, Fiona went out to Colombia on one of our short-term programs called Stride, a two-year commitment. And, she was teaching an English program at the Seminary in Medellin where Manuel and Patty Reagno are based.

[11 : 25] And, during that two years, God laid very clearly on her heart the plight of five million people that had been made refugees within their own country.

People dispossessed of their land, living in squatter communities and, and sometimes ending up in cities begging and not making themselves popular.

And, Fiona saw their plight and, had a sense of burden to want to come back to Colombia, to come to Scotland first, prepare, and return as a long-term missionary to Colombia.

Colombia. In a sense, we see those Colombian Christians living in those displaced communities where there are thriving churches crying out for help and assistance and Fiona feeling the burden, seeing the need to reach a new generation for Christ, to raise the importance of reaching young people with the gospel.

And, to do that, to bring together a number of colleagues to prepare and write courses and to train and bring people.

[12 : 53] So, we see God's process that it comes to her attention. People cry out in prayer and there is that sense of calling and burden that God puts on an individual, in this case in Fiona's life, and she responds and becomes God's answer and response to a specific need.

So, God calls ordinary people just like you and me. In verse 11, Moses says to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?

Who am I? Why me? And so often I think many Christians sidestep getting involved in the ministry or speaking up because we think, well, surely it's not me.

I'm a flawed individual. I'm not 100% on fire for God. I haven't got the experience. I haven't had the training.

And so often I think we miss out on opportunities that God sends our way because of a sense of not being right, of not being fully equipped to do the tasks which God puts upon us.

[14 : 33] When my wife and I were called before the OMF council, we had applied back in 1990 to join the mission OMF.

And we met in Glasgow and we were interviewed. And I was only a Christian of about three years standing. And with the various questions that were asked, I felt my own ignorance at times.

And I began to feel the sense of the audacity of my situation. Thinking, who am I that I think I could become a missionary to go and serve in Southeast Asia.

We were asked to leave the room whilst the council made a deliberation. And it seemed that they were in discussion a long time. And the longer they took, the more convinced that we became that they were trying to find a way to explain why we were not suitable.

And it was, with a heavy heart that we sat there and thinking, you know, we were so audacious to put in this application. And we wished we hadn't.

[15 : 48] And we thought of all the reasons why OMF shouldn't send us. And then we were called back into the room. And the chairman of the council said that they wanted to accept us.

And I remember my wife's words, I don't often quote her, but these are memorable words and I think would resonate with many of us. She said, up until this point I had such a high opinion of OMF, the missionaries that you sent to serve are outstanding individuals, doing great works for the Lord, seeing many people converted, encouraging others up in their faith.

They are giants and men and women of great faith. faith. And I had such a high opinion of OMF until you accepted us. Because it suddenly seems that the high standard has suddenly been brought right low for us to be able to step over and into the mission.

well, I share that hoping that it might challenge us that we you know, we've been feeling ordinary, feeling ill-equipped is not a reason not to respond to God of his prompt.

So perhaps share our faith with someone that we suddenly feel a burden that we ought to speak up for, to share the gospel with. And so often we ignore it thinking, oh, it's my imagination.

[17 : 24] But I do encourage you that God uses the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, that he will use the weak things to shame the things that are strong and powerful.

And indeed, you think of Moses, humble, a shepherd, out in the Midian Desert. This is the instrument, God's chosen purpose to rescue his people from slavery.

I'm sure all sorts of councils would never deem of choosing such a person to head up this mission to release God's captives from Egypt.

So God's concern is our concern, but God's promises his presence. And that's the second headline I want to kind of underline. God promises his presence that as he calls, so will he equip, that we do not go alone, but we go in tandem with the Lord.

In fact, the Lord Jesus gives a beautiful picture of one who comes, responds to the call of God, by reminding us that his burden is not heavy, it is light, that to take this yoke upon us, and the picture of the yoke is of Christ and us, side by side, shouldering the burden, and going forward.

[19 : 01] There's a lovely picture here that is being demonstrated that God promises to go with him. In verse 12, he said, I will be with you, 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, the mountain at Horeb. I will be with you. It's the same promise that Jesus gives to his disciples before he's taken up into heaven.

The close of Matthew's gospel, you've got that picture just before his ascension, of the disciples being gathered around him, and Jesus reminding them that all power and authority in heaven and earth has been given to him through the cross, paying the price of sin, through the resurrection from the dead, being raised in power from dead, reversing this curse of death as a result of sin, that there can be new life found, life eternal.

through Christ. And he said, therefore go, go and make disciples of all nations. And he finished this mandate, this command to go into all the world with the same promise, and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

church. So we heed God's summons, we feel our own weakness, we're trembling, we're fearful, we doubt, and yet we hold on in faith to the fact that God is calling, and he will do what he says, that he will go with us.

[20 : 47] it said that the will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us. And that's very true.

If you look back to highlights of our own Christian lives and know the time, the helping hand of the Lord through situation, events, catastrophes, breakthroughs with people, we will understand something of that, that we respond to the will of God.

It will not take us into a place where his grace will not also sustain us. I interviewed a young woman just turned 30, about a couple of years ago.

And she had suffered from ME for seven or eight years, and really spent most of her adult life, part of it bedridden, but certainly homebound, not able to do a job.

And she prayed that if God would heal her, that he would, that she would want to go and serve those that are shut in, like herself, shut in because of her illness.

[22 : 20] And so when she was made well, she remembered this promise. And she saw on our website about a need for a female chaplain in a prison in Guatemala.

Guatemala. And she inquired about it and then sent in an application to go for a two-year service there. And when I went to go and meet with Amy, as a father, I was thinking, this girl has been quite sheltered.

And I was quite concerned that she was going into a country that's quite violent, Guatemala, and certainly into a high security prison where all the girls were put there because they had murdered people.

And I was thinking, surely this isn't the right person. Well, I was looking with the eyes of the father, the eyes of the man. But it became clear that God very much was calling this young woman.

woman. And I read her prayer letters avidly. I prayed much for her because I was really quite concerned for her safety. And through these prayer letters, I saw a tremendous spiritual growth taking place in her life.

[23 : 43] A huge dependence upon God. And the extraordinary providence of God in bringing somebody that was from such a sheltered background and placing them in the heart of a prison that had known such horrendous carrying out of murders and gang warfare.

And she stood out and the girls started to take notes of what she had to say. She was just such an extraordinary and so very different from the context in which these girls in Guatemala had grown up in.

That the Lord placed her there for these girls to take note that there is another way of life, a way of compassion, a way to find forgiveness, a way of humility, of not living by the power of the gun.

And the girls started to come to Bible studies and want prayer for them. And Amy followed up with them when they were released from prison.

Amy is now preparing for theological studies to be better equipped to eventually return to that work. work. But it just shows that sometimes we look at ourselves or we look at one another and think, surely not.

[25 : 20] And yet God's purposes are carried out. It takes a humility, a spirit, a readiness to surrender, to be a people who will depend and hold on to God's promises and to cry out in mercy to use us in situations.

Well, Moses had the same concern. You know, why go to Egypt? Why would Pharaoh listen to me? Who am I to bring out 600 males, probably 2 million plus people?

Who am I to do that? Old and years and no longer in a place of authority and power. power as once he had been. And so let's move on just to chapter 4.

We're just going to dip into this before we conclude. Verse 1, Moses answered, but behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, but they will say the Lord did not appear to you.

Here's Moses' concern. In a sense, it's our concern. If I go, if I speak, if I do this, why would people take notes? It's just me after all.

[26 : 41] And this is what Moses is sharing very openly with the Lord. And God gives him two object lessons that you can read of in verses 2 to 7.

He says, take your staff and throw it on the ground. The staff becomes a snake, and then take up the snake, and it becomes a staff again. God is showing the miraculous power of God, taking a simple thing, like a staff, and making it something deadly.

And then the other object lesson that Moses had to put his hand inside his cloak, and he takes it out, it's leprous, puts it back in, and brings out his hand, and heal it again.

Just another object lesson that he has not been mistaken, that God will go with him, that he will act with power and persuasion to bring the might of this superpower to its knees.

Just to give one example, just from my own mission career in the Philippines, we went to one village, and there was a church there, and we were following in the footsteps of missionaries who had been pioneers, and there had been a gap of five or six years before we came on the scene, and some of the churches were doing quite well, others were really struggling.

[28 : 19] Well, this particular church that we came to was one of the latter ones. Nobody had been trained, there was a high illiteracy in that church, and many of the young people there, they only came along to the church because we looked strange and different and spoke their language in an amusing fashion.

And on the first night, all the young men were at the back of the church, and the women were at the front, and the atmosphere was more like a pub than a church.

There were a lot of jokes being made, particularly at my expense. And the second night, it was the same environment, just this sense of ridicule.

And we were there for nine days, so on day three, we needed to wash our clothes. We went down to the river, and as we waited for the clothes to dry on the rocks beside the river, my wife and I were thinking, we're not looking forward to another evening in this church where they're just going to make fun of us.

And we prayed. I mean, we had been praying each days, but we had a real burden to pray, because going back into that environment was not something that we were looking forward to.

[29 : 45] It was something that if we could have avoided it, we would have done. But we had committed to nine days there, and this was coming to the end of the first third, and it was just going from worse to worse.

Well, that evening, as people came in, we started teaching from the Word of God. They started to listen, and there was a quietness which we had not seen the likes of before.

before. And as people left that church that night, I overheard some comments from people saying, I understand God's love and his power to break the hold of darkness over me.

And from now on, I'm going to live for Christ. And it wasn't just one person that was saying this, there was like a murmur going through, an anticipation, an excitement, that finally they had understood what the gospel was about.

And as my wife and I went to sleep that night, we were sleeping in a bamboo hut. The hut wasn't even long enough to be able to lie out full stretch.

[31 : 06] And it was a really rickety old bamboo hut. But we fell asleep. But in the middle of the night, we were aware that people were about the hut.

And I should say, as we were falling asleep, we also heard the shaman chanting to the spirits of the dead. When we woke up in the middle of the night, we were told never to open the door because there were Marxist rebels in the area.

Mind you, a bamboo house wouldn't have been much protection if they wanted to take us anyway, but we weren't disposed to open up the door and go out and see what's going on. But we felt a palpable fear, a sense of dark oppression about us.

And this chanting was going on. And we felt hands tie paraphernalia to the exposed floor rafters of our hut.

And we prayed. And we sensed a real sense of evil. But we prayed. God gave us peace that after these people left, we managed to get back to sleep again.

[32 : 18] And in the morning, when we came out, none of our neighbors would look us in the eye. In fact, they tried to avoid us. And I had to go over to one of them and said, well, what's the meaning of these things that have been tied to our house?

us. And the one who hosted us, whose hut we were staying in, he said, a curse of death has been placed upon you and Alexandra, that's my wife, and you will not live beyond midday.

They did not doubt the power of their shaman. And it seemed that the enthusiasm from the previous night had suddenly evaporated.

And this pool of dread and fear and oppression had taken hold of that community again. Well, Satan shot himself in the foot, didn't he?

Because I stand here before you. And the fact that we didn't drop dead at midday was proof to them that the Lord who sent us was the Almighty One.

[33 : 27] And that was proof to them that if God would protect us, he would also protect those who would put their faith in him. When those nine days came to an end, I mean, the final six nights of teaching in that wee church, absolutely full of people.

And people outside the windows had open windows that no air could get in and just sweat was running off us as we sat in in this very closed space with people hungry for God's word.

And when we left, the whole village came with us down the trail, down by the river. And it was a two hour walk to the bridge where we were going to pick up a bus.

And normally we would have like five or six people going with us. But as I say, the whole village came with us. But as we were going along, groups would disappear up a tributary stream, going over a path, going to Hamlet in a clearing in the jungle.

And it became apparent that what they had heard and what they came to believe and put their faith in Christ was so good, they were suddenly free. The light had been switched on.

[34 : 49] There was no more fear of evil and oppression. And they wanted to share this good news with all they knew. And so the whole community came up.

We didn't tell them to. This was their response. This is too good to keep to ourselves. That is a demonstration of God going with us.

It wasn't through clever teaching. I spoke their language badly. They struggled to understand what I had to say, but they listened avidly.

And between us and clarifications, they did understand. But it certainly wasn't me or any persuasion or cleverness, but it was God's power, his spirit, bringing people back to him.

Okay, finally we look at Moses' doubts and excuses. Chapter 4, verse 10. 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'm slow of speech and of tongue.

[36 : 04] I'm slow of speech and of tongue. Every time I come into a pulpit, I feel the miracle of God because it's not a place I would ever have chosen to be.

Maybe I would have shirked from being a Christian if I knew that this was God's will for me. I'm a shy, retiring person. When I'm at my home church, I sit on the back row and I well equate with what Moses is saying here.

My Lord, I'm not eloquent either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue. And so often we've got such a low self-image of ourselves that we think God can't possibly use us.

But you know, I think it's when we are small enough. It was said of Hudson Taylor, he was a man small enough for God to use. We can become too big.

We can become confident and arrogant in our ways that we no longer depend upon God. But take a man like Moses, he's not going to go in his own strength.

[37 : 19] He's going to go with fear and trembling, just as Paul says to the Corinthians, you know, I came to you with great fear and trembling. I didn't come to you with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power.

And Moses is an example of that, going with a humble sense of utter dependence upon the power of God, because he knew he had nothing of himself to be able to offer, to be able to redeem these people from their slavery.

glory. And God replies to him, who has made man's mouth, verse 11, who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind?

Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go and I will be your mouth and teach you what you shall speak. Words that bring to mind what Jesus reminded his disciples, Matthew 10, 19, when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it.

At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. And that is the incredible thing, that when we do step out, when we do speak up for Christ, when we do speak to someone that we think are going to be derider and maybe even abusive, but we speak because we feel that sense of inner conviction and compulsion of the spirit to open up to them, is a demonstration of God's power, and that we're given the words, and the person's given the ears to heed and to respond in a way that we are quite astonished by.

[39 : 18] also with the Sanhedrin, they also noted when they had taken Peter and John captive, they saw the courage of these two men and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men.

They were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. It seems that God delights in using the lesser things of this world because it more demonstrates that the power is of him and not of us.

And then finally we get to verse 13, and Moses says this, O my Lord, please send someone else.

please send someone else. And I'm sure that there have been great people who have responded to God eventually, who have had that initial reaction, O Lord, please send someone else.

Surely not me, you've not got the right person. Choose someone who's much more capable, who's trained, who's eloquent, who is persuasive in argument, who has all the theology, sent them, not me.

[40 : 48] In other words, it could be that he's feeling that low opinion about himself, but it could also mean that he doesn't want to bother.

After all, he's an old man now, and he just wants to live his life out peacefully, minding sheep in an out-of-the-way place.

Just leave me alone. Leave me in peace. Well, there we have a picture of the almighty and the unlikely, and I pray that it would encourage, that it will challenge us, that to not always ignore God's promptings, to believe that as we surrender and pray to him, God will do what he says he will do, that he will surely go with us.

That it's his work, it's his business to convert people, it's his work of his spirit to bring awakening, and a people to come back to him.

We are merely instruments, we faithfully carry out our small parts, but trusting him in God to do the great thing. So take hearts, God promises to do his work in and through us.

[42 : 26] Let me just pray briefly before I hand over. Father, we give you thanks that you do not despise the things that are not of this world.

You know the heart and mind of each one of us here, there's no secret. It says a veil is lifted and you see into the core of our beings.

You know what metal we are made of that we are often doubtful, fearful people. And yet we choose to believe we are here this evening because we have encountered you or we seek to encounter you.

take residence afresh that you would be lord indeed over our lives, that we would celebrate you and would rise up and do the things, the small things at first that you challenge us to do, to put right, that we may go on to bigger things that you put there, things that are far in excess of what we are capable of doing.

Help us to believe that you choose the likes of us. And we would pray that you would use us, that we would see you lifted up, majestic, mighty to save, irresistible.

[44 : 09] Come and have your way amongst us, we pray. Amen.