

God Revealed in the Burning Bush

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[0 : 00] Let's turn just for a short time this evening to the chapter we read, Exodus chapter 3. And we're in a sense following on from what we were looking at last week.

But we're going to read from the beginning again, chapter 3 of Exodus, page 55. Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian.

And he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

And 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. And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great sight. Why the bush is not burned? When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses.

And he said, Here I am. Then he said, Do not come near. Take the sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. And he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

[1 : 13] And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Last week, we began to look at the life of this extraordinary man, Moses.

A man who takes one of the central places in the Old Testament. And we looked at the chapter that begins with his life, his birth rather, and how his mother, of course, saved him from the Egyptian soldiers by building a basket for him and by hiding him in the bulrushes in the Nile.

And we saw earlier that the chapter moves, it fast forwards 40 years to when Moses is 40 years old, when he was grown up. And it tells us how he made a massive mistake when he was grown up.

He killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew. And that's the kind of mistake you would think that you would never recover from.

And as we saw last week, the kind of mistake that you would imagine, that it would put you outside of God's will altogether. Rather, some Christians have concluded that because they have made one error, that God can't have anything more to do with them.

[2 : 38] Many Christians, I've heard people who live under that awful cloud. They think, well, because of such and such a thing I did many years ago, I have never been within the will of God again.

But this chapter we saw, it tells us that that's a wrong assumption. It's a wrong view. And I'm not trying to say that there's an excuse for doing something wrong. There was never an excuse for Moses doing something wrong.

And yet, God is always greater than our sin. Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound.

That's the teaching of the New Testament. It's the teaching that runs all the way through the Bible.

God's grace is greater than our sin. It doesn't give us an excuse to live a life of sin, but it does give us a huge amount of comfort. It gives us the Lord we can run to, to know that as he promised, I will repay the years that the locusts have eaten.

That's been a tremendous encouragement to many a Christian who have been conscious of their own failure, their own wrongdoing, and yet come to a God who is full of grace and mercy.

[3 : 41] That's the kind of God that we come to worship this evening. Same God, same God as worshipped, as dealt with Moses, is the God that we worship this evening. Well, of course, the thing that Moses had done became known, and Pharaoh took out a contract on Moses.

He was going to kill him. Moses had to flee the country and flee into Midian and into a completely new chapter in his life. He was welcomed into the home of a man called Jethro, and Jethro gave him one of his daughters as a wife.

And the last we hear of him, as we come to the end of chapter two, is that Moses has married this girl, Zipporah, and they've had a baby boy, Gershom, and that's the last we hear of him, until fast

forward once again in chapter three, when he's 80 years old.

We know nothing about Moses during those 40 years. Isn't that remarkable, isn't it? That practically all that's known of Moses is known between the ages of 80 until the day that he died.

God's purpose was fulfilled in Moses when he was in later years. God has his own timetable. He's never in a hurry. God will bring his own purposes to pass whatever those purposes are.

[4 : 50] You're not a Moses. I'm not a Moses. But God, we have to believe, and we are given that assurance that God has a plan and a purpose for the life of all of his people.

And here we have, in chapter three, Moses is 80 years old, and he's going about his ordinary business. The Bible is all about ordinary people who God takes and transforms into great men and women.

Ordinary people who are going about and living by faith. It is God who meets with them and encounters them and deals with them and steps into their lives.

And they're ordinary people. They're not particularly gifted. Gideon wasn't particularly gifted. He was the least of his tribe. And yet he was the man who God chose to lead the people of Israel against the enemies at that time.

It's the same with Moses. It's the same with Abraham. It's the same with every one of the people of Israel. They were ordinary men and ordinary women going about. And one of the things that strikes me about this chapter is how Moses...

[5 : 52] Moses... I wonder how much Israel... I'm sure that even 40 years later, Israel was still very much on Moses' mind. I wonder how much he prayed for them and thought about them and wondered how they were doing and how they were being able to survive the cruelty of the Egyptians.

They would have been very much, I guess, on his mind. But chapter 3 tells us about how God meets with Moses. And his purpose in meeting with Moses is that Moses has to go back.

His plan for him is to go back to Egypt and to bring the people of Israel to deliverance and to safety as their saviour. God is raising up a saviour in order to deliver his people.

And here we see the first glimpses, perhaps, of how Moses is a prefigurement, a kind of a foreshadow, a dim foreshadow of the saviour who was going to come in the New Testament, in Bethlehem, and who was going to deliver the people of God from sin.

But here is Moses being prepared by the Lord. And the first thing that happens is that there is this meeting, a meeting between God and Moses, a face-to-face.

[7 : 07] Now, this is interesting because throughout the Bible, Moses is distinct because we read that there was never a man like Moses, someone who knew God face-to-face.

Now, that doesn't mean there weren't other people in the Bible who heard the voice of God or who obeyed God or who were faithful and obedient to God. The Bible's full of obedient men and women. But none of them were like Moses in that Moses met with God face-to-face.

That's how closely he knew the Lord. And here's the beginning of that closeness. And from then on, Moses was to meet with God and encounter God on several occasions after that time.

But here's the first of these encounters, the first of these meetings. Now, you remember that last week, we went through the chapter by asking three common questions that Christians very often ask in terms of how God works and how God operates.

I want to do exactly the same in terms, not in terms of the Christian life, but in terms of what God is or our understanding of God. Because this chapter is important in giving us a direct understanding of who God is, what God is, what God is like, what God is like.

[8 : 24] In fact, these are the very three questions I'd like us to ask. First, the question is this. What is God? Or who is God? The second question I'd like us to ask is, what is God like?

The third question I'd like us to ask is, what does God want? I guess that when it comes to when you think about God tonight, after all, that's why we're here.

Perhaps you're here as an inquirer, somebody who isn't a Christian, you're not committed to the gospel, you're not committed to Christ, but you're here nonetheless and I guess the reason you're here is at least partly because you're interested in finding out more about who God is.

Well, here is one of these chapters in which God reveals himself in a very particular way and we're entirely dependent, if we're going to find out what God is like, we're entirely dependent, are we not, upon what he tells us in the Bible and particularly in chapters like this.

I would suggest to you the whole Bible. If we read the whole Bible, it's all a picture of what God is like, but there are particular places where he reveals himself.

[9 : 39] That was the reason why he met with Moses on that particular occasion. And I want us to ask these three questions then this evening. What is God?

What is God like? And what does God want? What is then? What is God? Well, the answer he gives us in this chapter is, it begins with this, that he just is.

He simply is. When Moses asked him, in verse 13, Moses said to God, if I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they asked me, what is his name?

And of course, the reason behind that question was to find out, who is it? Who is this God that you're speaking about? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am.

Do you ever notice that, do you ever notice that at no time in the Bible there's any explanation ever given as to why God exists or how God exists?

[10 : 43] The Bible always, from the very beginning, the Bible assumes that just God is. He just is. Do you come to this, I wonder if you read this with me and you were saying, well that's not enough for me, that's not enough.

I need to know, why is there a God? I need to know where God came from. Well I'll tell you, I have bad news for you. You will never ever find that out. Because he's not going to tell us.

He doesn't have to tell us. He's God. Remember that, you know, we live in a world where we investigate something. When something's mysterious to us, we investigate it, we want to find out more, we don't want to stop.

Well you can do that with science, you can do that with geology, you can do that with geography, you can do that with biology, you can do that in every sphere that there is in the world.

In fact, God says that that's the way we were created, to find out and not to stop until we understood things. Yet, when it comes to God, that's different. God will not tell us anything more than he has told us in his word.

[11 : 53] And he has not told us only a fraction. When you think about it, we're talking tonight about the creator. You think about the vastness of the universe and the complexity of the universe.

You think of all the advancement that mankind has made in terms of science and technology and he's only just, there's many senses in which he's only just begun to discover the universe around him.

The universe is so utterly vast. God is the creator of all of these things and therefore God has to be infinitely vaster and greater and bigger than any of these things.

If we were even, there's no way that we could ever understand or begin to understand if God was to tell us everything about himself. There's no way that God could tell us everything about himself.

We just don't have the capacity to know or to understand everything that there is to know about God. But what God has done is says, here's what you need to know. And here's as much as I'm prepared to tell you.

[12 : 57] And as much as he's prepared to tell us is what we need to know. And we have to have the faith tonight to say, alright, here is what he's told me about himself.

I need to accept that by faith and I need to discover how I must respond to what he has told me about himself. That's what he asks us to do.

We'll come on to that in a few moments' time when we deal with the question, what does God want? He wants us to respond to how he has made himself known in the Bible.

But there's no more than that. I simply am. But these words, I am, they describe to us the existence of God, but they also describe to us the eternity of God because these words could be said 50 billion years before the earth was created and they could be said 50 billion years from now.

There's never a moment in time of eternity when God is not. That's why some people translate these words, I will be what I will be.

[14 : 07] It tells us, these words tell us that God is eternal. He's without beginning and without end. And when you think about it, it has to be that way. Because everything we know and have experienced in this world, in this universe, it has a beginning and it has an end.

It is temporal, but God is a different, a different dimension altogether. There is no beginning and there is no end. He is simply eternal.

Now again, once again, people get stuck at that and they say, well, I can't even begin to understand what that means. Well, we're talking about God. We haven't got the capacity, we haven't got the ability to understand what that is.

What God wants us to do is to accept by faith what he says about himself. But these words also tell us that God is mystery.

We've said that, we've touched on that already. He is mystery. He's always mystery. Because, as I said, we simply cannot understand. That's why it's very much put in the words that Moses said when he saw the intriguing, the mysterious sight of the bush.

[15:17] Why was it that God decided, when God decided to make himself known to Moses, he should choose to set a bush on fire with his fire in such a way that while the bush was on fire, it didn't burn?

Why was it that this was the image of God that God chose to make himself known? Why did he not, why did he not portray himself in flesh and blood?

The image, the kind of image that we might expect with a face and with arms and legs. Because God doesn't have those things. Because God is invisible and therefore when he reveals himself, he reveals his character, what he is.

He reveals that through symbol. And we have to just do what Moses did and we have to at the very beginning we have to say, well, I have to turn aside to see the strange sight why the bush is not burned.

Perhaps that's where you are tonight. where you just begin to see God as something that is incredibly mysterious and yet something has got to you and you can't help but doing what Moses did and say, well, I'm going to go over and see the strange sight.

[16:35] I hope that that's where you are this evening and I hope you go to see. Perhaps the Bible to you tonight is nothing more than a strange sight but there are things in the Bible that are so mysterious and so strange and yet so so captivating so intriguing to you that you feel that you need to go and find out more about how this God of Jesus Christ and how this Jesus Christ who has touched and changed the lives of millions of people and you know the people whose lives Jesus has changed and you know that there is something unique about the Christian faith that's different from every other belief system in the world.

Is that where you are tonight? Then go, do what Moses did. Go over and see how God mysteriously reveals himself and it's as Moses went over that he discovered more and more and more about this sight this God the God who he actually had worshipped all his life and yet was only now beginning to understand.

And that's the story of all of our lives isn't it? And even those who have been on the road for many years we feel that we're only at the very beginning in our understanding of God.

So God is he is he is eternal and he is mystery he is mystery and whilst he does tell us about himself there's much that he doesn't tell us about.

Second question what then is God like? Who is God or what is God? That's the first question. The second question is what is God like?

[18:13] First thing I want us to see from this passage is that God is powerful. You might ask well in what way does this does this passage teach us that God is powerful? After all if you want to see the power of God you have to go to the beginning of the world for example where God spoke the universe into being by the word of his power.

Now that's power. but the kind of power that I'm talking about this evening is the way in which God deals with people men and women in this world not through the kind of power that we expect.

Perhaps there are some of you tonight you say well I would expect God to really reveal himself in unmistakable terms by literally moving mountains to show the world that he is.

That's what I would expect. That's not the way that God operates. And even when he did come close to operating in that fashion in the person of Jesus Christ who walked on water who fed the 5,000 who raised Lazarus in front of hundreds of people who stood at the grave of Lazarus and watched as Jesus spoke and said Lazarus come out and Lazarus who had been dead for four days actually rose from the dead and came out of the tomb and they still didn't believe him.

So it just doesn't work. The idea somehow that if God was going to do what you expect him to do that you would believe in him that's just not true because when he did there were many people who didn't believe in him who chose not to you see unbelief is not a matter of seeing the right proofs.

[20 : 01] Unbelief begins when we decide not to believe in God. Unbelief is what says I don't want God in my life and I want you to be honest tonight and ask whether or not that is the root problem and if you were to be really honest with yourself and with others that figures deeply in your search for God tonight whether you really want him or whether you don't and I would even go further than that and that's what makes all the difference isn't it because all the proof is there in the Bible all the reasons are given in the Bible it's all there and yet there's something and that something always lies within ourselves we are the problem and I want you to notice how God works things it always intrigues me this what we call the providence of God now we touched on this last week remember how we saw how Moses' family seemed to be up against the most impossible circumstances where they had a baby and the rule of the time the decree of the time from Pharaoh was that all baby boys were to be taken by the soldiers and thrown into the river

Nile and Moses' mother determined by faith the Bible tells us that by faith she determined within ourselves that she was not going to let her baby die so she took him and she created a basket for him she coated it with papyrus and she placed it in the Nile that was her part but we also saw what God's part in all of this was that by his peculiar incredible providence he worked it out so that the princess would come down to the river that very moment the princess would take pity on him that she would adopt him into her house and that Moses for the next ten years would be brought up not for the next thirty years forty years would be brought up in the palace of Pharaoh himself so what we said last week was that whilst Pharaoh imagined that he was on the throne of his kingdom his empire that the destruction of his empire was growing up under his very nose now that's the providence of God and it works people have called it the mystery of God's providence and that's what I'm calling tonight the power of God and you see it all the way through the Bible it was the same when

Jesus was born how Herod had decreed that all the baby boys had to be killed that was not going to stop God fulfilling his purposes and bringing Messiah into the world why because nothing nothing can stop God doing his will and achieving his purposes not a thing you know I would like to think that tonight that would give you confidence in this great God the God of the Bible we'll see in a few moments time that God is personal so that we too by understanding the power of God would come to him and ask him for his mercy and ask him that we would come to know him more and more that's the first thing God is powerful now in what way does the power of God work well here is Moses 80 years old and I don't know what thoughts were going through his mind but I have difficulty believing that he imagined that his life would consist of anything more than a quiet retirement in Midian with his wife and his family and his few sheep and he was content with that that wasn't God's plan for him though God is full of surprises always always will be full of surprises and the way that God's power worked was that God met with him at the last the moment that Moses expected at least in ordinary circumstances so that by the time Moses went out that morning on an ordinary day to take his father-in-law's sheep and to pasture them as he had done for years previously by the time he came home that night he was a new person he had to pack up all his bags and he had to take a new direction altogether that's the power of God nothing can change a person like the power of God that's what I mean by God is powerful and in some senses it's useless to you tonight to know that Jesus can walk on the water if he can't change your life but the gospel says to us tonight that

God can change our lives and God will change our lives as we come to him by faith trusting in him but God is also personal you notice how he interacts with Moses God is not just power he is person he hears in this chapter he remembers I have remembered my covenant with my people he speaks he calls Moses name Moses Moses he commands Moses take the shoes off your feet from the ground on which you stand is holy ground the conversation that follows is I and you this is what I am this is what you must be and when you think about it why is it tonight that we are personal beings that's what marks us out from the animals we are personal we're able to relate to one another in communicable language we're able to speak and learn how to relate to one another why is it that is a particular feature of the human race that we're able to speak to one another we're able to listen and our words affect us our words can make us cry our words can make us laugh our words can break a person can destroy a person conversation can be either the making of a person or the destruction of a person words are so important in the human race I don't need to tell you that we all know it we assume it we're personal beings why is it that we are personal beings because

[26 : 11] God has created us in his image and the reason we are speaking beings and relating beings is because we have this relationship because we were created to be in the image of God and to relate to God as well as relating to one another I want to go on I want to say that this passage tells us that God is is he humbled himself this is the most remarkable thing isn't it that God who created the heavens and the earth with his outstanding power is an unimaginable power is the God who condescends let me tell you what one person has said about this the eternal God he said lowers himself into a bush amid the dirt and the rocks he is present among the goats and the sheep with all their grime and their dirt and yet his humility does not compromise his holiness that's then that's the the the next thing I was going to say about the Lord God says I am holy what does that holy mean it means that our wrongdoing and our sin is a big issue with God no it is the big issue with

God it's the one thing the one reality that stands between you and him and me and him it's the thing that separates us from God what does holiness mean God's holiness means his separateness from the world why does God have to be separate from the world if he created it to be a perfect place it's because it's no longer a perfect place it's because the whole of humankind has risen up against God and rebelled against him God is holy that means that he is other and that means that if we are to come close to him this passage tells us what it means to come close to God the first thing that Moses had to do was to take the shoes off his feet in other words nothing wrong with the poor shoes that were on his feet but they were symbolic of the sin that he carried around everywhere he went carried around on his being just the same as our shoes our shoes carry around the dirt that we that we step in from day to day there are some cultures in the world that won't allow you to to come into their homes except unless you take your shoes off your feet because you carry around when you think about it it's true isn't it you can you think about the places you walk in and then you come into a clean home perhaps perhaps they're right and and insisting that we take the shoes off our feet well that's what the Lord was saying the Lord was saying that the that because I am here this is my territory and you can't come into my territory while the dirt remains on your feet that's the situation we're all in tonight you can't come into God's territory when there's dirt on our feet and there's only one way of getting rid of that dirt and that's for

Jesus to take it away from us and there's one more thing I want us to look at this evening and that is that God is faithful what is it that he tells Moses he says I am I am now that had a special meaning for the Israelites we've already we've already looked at how at what that means as far as God is concerned but it had a special meaning for the Israelites because centuries before God had called Abraham out of where he lived out of the colonies and he had made a promise to him from now on I am your God you see the connection I am his whole identity the identity of God was from then on bound with the identity of Abraham's family he was from then on glued as it were he was bound tied to Abraham's family and that meant he was there for their good and for their protection and for their blessing he had promised he had made this promise that from then on every all nations would one day be blessed by the seed on in the seed of Abraham's family and now he's returning to that very same family 400 years later and he has not forgotten his promise and one of the most one of the most encouraging things the thing that I need to know about God tonight is that he is faithful and that what he says in his word he will actually carry out and he is part of his word that assures me and in no uncertain terms that what

God says he means he always means what he says and that was the best news that the Israelites were going to hear that was good news for them you see there's no use going to the Israelites and telling them well here is proof of the existence of God that wasn't what they needed even if Moses had gone to them and even if he had given them every proof and every scientific or philosophical proof that there is a God that would have been useless to them because every day at five o'clock in the morning they were dragged out of their beds and they were they were dragged off to their places of work many of them were dying under the cruelty of the taskmaster of the Egyptians remember what I said last week that they were treating them like donkeys as far as the Egyptians were concerned the slaves were treated like nothing more than donkeys you imagine that kind of life and imagine you were you were in pain and the agony your life was coming to an end all your strength is gone and somebody comes to you and says well here is the proof for the existence of God what good is that completely useless but somebody comes to you and says the God of your forefathers who promised to Abraham your forefather that he will rescue you and deliver you and save you now that's good news especially the day when Moses came with that promise that lifted

up the hearts of all those who care to believe and who trust it's a real test of their faith to see how many of them really believed that God would keep his promise and it's the same with me and you tonight when

God promises I am the resurrection and the life he that believes in me though he were dead yet shall he live is God really going to do that yes he is why because he's faithful to his promise he means what he says he doesn't say it unless he truly means it that's why I can lay hold upon those promises tonight and know that I can face death the last the greatest enemy that I have in this world face death and know that death is not the end that death is but a doorway into heaven itself I am the resurrection and the life so God is all of these things what is God like he's holy he's powerful he humbles himself he is personal he's faithful and he keeps his promises what then does God want you would imagine wouldn't you this is the third question you would imagine wouldn't you that a God the Lord is going to first of all make demands on

[33 : 58] Moses as soon as Moses discovered that discovers that he's in the presence of the Almighty God you would expect that God would say right here is the first thing second third you have to do do do all these things for me that's what you would expect isn't it because our view of religion is finding our way to God and pleasing God earning our way into God's kingdom and to into his favor climbing the mountain that's what you expect isn't it but that's not what happens that's not what God wants God's message to Moses does not begin with what he must do God's message to Moses begins with what God does what God wants Moses to hear and to know is the mind of God the love of God the compassion of God the power of God particularly towards his people I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmaster I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians that was the message you see you we often think about this chapter as God's purpose in this chapter is to send Moses into into Egypt to deliver the people that's not the purpose at all that was the byproduct the purpose of this chapter is to show the mercy and the grace and the kindness and the compassion of God in despite all that the people of Israel have done against God and that's the gospel that's what the Bible tells me it tells me that despite all that

I have the kind of life that I have lived as a rebel against God God says to me tonight I have come down to save you for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him that's what we mean by the grace of God this is where the gospel begins God coming down to where we are in the person of Jesus Christ it begins with God God does it all in rescuing us as sinners from the hopelessness and the guilt and the condemnation of death so I hope that tonight you see the gospel in this chapter God is the gospel God is made known to us tonight in the person of Jesus Christ who came into the world as one of us to take away our sins to remove our guilt to remove the the awfulness of a lost eternity by giving himself and by suffering the wrath and the anger of God at Calvary and so removing all that stood between me and God does anything stand tonight between you and God I hope not I hope it's been taken away by Jesus and if not only Jesus can take it away and he takes it away as we ask him we come in faith and we accept you see in many senses Moses Moses God made no demands of all that Moses all that the only thing that God asked Moses to do in this chapter was to be a mouthpiece in many senses Moses had to do nothing except simply say what God asked him to say God did it all and God has done it all on the cross for us removed our guilt and our iniquity to give us a new life by believing and trusting in him let's pray father in heaven once again we ask that your word will be opened up to us in a new and a living way and we completely depend upon your spirit to to apply that word to us we give thanks that your word makes God known in a way in which we are able to understand as much of you as you're prepared to tell us Lord we give thanks for what you don't tell us of yourself we're not able to comprehend the vastness and the complexity of the mind and the nature and the character and the being of God and yet you have revealed enough for us to know how to be saved and how to be one and how to be right with God in the gospel we pray Lord that as we turn aside as we've been doing this evening just turning aside to see this strange sight that it will become clearer and clearer to us what you are who you are what you are like and what you want in us and for us we give thanks Lord that what you want in us and for us is our salvation that we will be free that we would be free from sin

Lord take it away from us we pray in Jesus amen