Moses and the Burning Bush

July 2

Bible Background - EXODUS 3
Printed Text - EXODUS 3:1–12
Devotional Reading - 2 CHRONICLES 19:4–7

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EXAMINE the details of how Moses was called and the self-revealed nature of God, who called him; EMPATHIZE with God’s awareness of injustice and His desire to correct it; and ADDRESS injustice in ways that honor God’s identity, purpose, and presence.

In Focus

John was a busy salesman who had to travel extensively, driving hours at a time from city to city and sometimes state to state. Although traveling was a job requirement, John made sure he was home every other weekend to be with his family and attend church.

One Sunday at church, the pastor shared with the congregation that he had received multiple complaints from some of the young women in the church, who were being harassed by young men who sat on the corner nearby. “I am aware of the harassment and the fear it has caused. In the past week, one of the girls was attacked,” the pastor reported. He asked men in the congregation to reach out to these young men. Through mentoring, the pastor believed they could be helped.

Several weeks later, the pastor approached John and asked him to help. He knew that John had experience with troubled boys, and wanted him to lead the effort. Before the pastor could finish, John objected. He told the pastor that he was not sure he would relate well to the young men, and his work took him away most of the time. The pastor assured John that he would not have to engage the men alone—he and two of the church elders would support him.

In today’s lesson, we will examine how God called Moses and used him as an agent in the redemption of His people. Has God ever given you the desire to get involved in some kind of ministry at church or even just to help someone, but you made an excuse not to do it?

Keep in Mind

“Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee
unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:9–10).

KJV

Exodus 3:1 Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.

2 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

3 And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.

4 And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

5 And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

6 Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.

7 And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;

8 And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

9 Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

10 Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

11 And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?

12 And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.
Exodus 3:1

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God.

2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn’t burn up.

3 “This is amazing,” Moses said to himself. “Why isn’t that bush burning up? I must go see it.”

4 When the LORD saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, “Moses! Moses!” “Here I am!” Moses replied.

5 “Do not come any closer,” the LORD warned. “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.

6 I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering.

8 So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live.

9 Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them.

10 Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.”

11 But Moses protested to God, “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?”

12 God answered, “I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain.”

The People, Places, and Times

Mount Sinai. This mountain was a very important landmark for the Israelites. Also called Horeb, it has huge significance in Judaism. Mount Sinai is both the site of Moses receiving his call from God (Exodus 3:1) and the Children of Israel receiving God’s Law and covenant
(Exodus 19–20). After the Israelites were rescued from Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness; there they camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses climbed the mountain to enter God’s presence. God revealed Himself to Moses and gave to him His law and covenant affirming Israel as His holy nation: they would be one nation under one God, who would be their leader (Exodus 19:3–6).

**Theophany.** This term does not occur in the Bible, but is used to describe a narrative in which God’s presence is made visible to individuals or groups. The word is derived from two Greek words: theos, “God,” and phainein, “to appear.” In the Old Testament, God’s appearance takes various forms. In Exodus 3:1–12, God appears to Moses as the angel of the Lord in the blazing fire in the bush.

**Background**

Jacob’s family moved to Egypt at the invitation of Joseph, who had been reunited with his family after being a prince in Pharaoh’s court. Famine was hurting the people, and Joseph had control of Egypt’s stores and resources as one of Pharaoh’s rulers. Seventy of Jacob’s direct descendants moved with him to Egypt. In time, Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s brothers died; Jacob’s descendants grew in number, and the Egyptians began to fear them. The pharaoh who came to power after Joseph’s death did not know him or the Israelites’ history in Egypt, and became fearful that this growing group of people would one day rise up to conquer his kingdom. So, in an effort to repress the Hebrews, the Egyptians made them slaves and forced them into hard and oppressive labor. God was aware of His people’s troubles, because He told Abraham that His people would be strangers in a foreign land and oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. However, He would rescue His people and punish the oppressor (Genesis 15:13–16). The Egyptians’ oppression was fierce: they resorted to genocidal strategies, including killing Hebrew male babies. God in His providence saved Moses in the bushes of the Nile River and allowed him to be raised in Pharaoh’s house. When Moses grew older, he saw the oppression of his people and one day, in an attempt to save a Hebrew slave, killed an Egyptian. His act of murder did not go unnoticed. When Pharaoh ordered Moses’ arrest, he escaped to Midian. Moses moved from being a prince in Pharaoh’s court to being God’s shepherd in the wilderness. In his occupation as a shepherd tending his flock, God calls him, because He had purposed to use Moses as an instrument in the redemption of His people whom He called to Himself.

**At-A-Glance**

1. God Appears (Exodus 3:1–4)
2. The Presence of God (vv. 5–6)
3. God Engages Moses (vv. 7–10)
4. God Commissions Moses (vv. 11–12)
In Depth

1. God Appears (Exodus 3:1–4)

The lesson text begins by locating Moses in Midian and giving background to demonstrate that his life had changed. Once an Egyptian prince, Moses was now involved in the life of his own people. He was a shepherd, an occupation that he would have thought demeaning as an Egyptian, because Egyptians despised shepherds (Genesis 46:34).

Moses was out tending to his father-in-law’s flock, which suggests that he had not accumulated a flock of his own. He was located far away from Midian, because “He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God.” As a shepherd, he would have traveled to ensure he had good pasture for his flock to graze on. Out in the wilderness, at Sinai, God, in the form of the angel of the Lord, suddenly appears to Moses in a blazing fire from the bush. Moses saw the bush that it was on fire but did not burn. Through this unusual encounter, God captures Moses’ attention and reveals Himself. The Lord also does this in the life of the believer; in the midst of everyday life, He draws us to Himself.

The Lord not only reveals Himself, but also speaks and calls Moses by name, suggesting that this encounter was personal. In ancient Near Eastern culture, repeating the name signified endearment. This encounter must have disarmed Moses, because he immediately answers, “Here I am!” suggesting his readiness to listen.

2. The Presence of God (vv. 5–6)

Without disclosing His identity, God commands Moses not to come any closer, but to remove his sandals. He immediately reveals to Moses the holy nature of His presence. The ground itself was not holy, but became holy because God was there. God is holy, and we cannot enter into His presence lightly or in any way that does not recognize the magnitude of His holiness. In acknowledgment of God’s holiness, Moses takes off his sandals. Then, God discloses His identity, saying that He is the God of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God connects Moses to his heritage. Moses realizes that he is in the presence of God and responds by hiding his face because he was afraid to look at Him. In ancient Near Eastern culture, it was believed that if someone looked at a god, his life was in danger. Moses knew that looking at God could have meant death (Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:20; Judges 13:22), because he understood that God is holy.

3. God Engages Moses (vv. 7–10)

In Exodus 2:23–25, the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance. He heard their cry, remembered the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 15:4–6; 26:1–5, 35:9–12), and felt deep concern. The interaction between God and Moses continues in verse 7. God tells Moses He has seen, heard, and is aware of the suffering of His people in Egypt. In fact, the Hebrew text emphatically indicates that God certainly had seen His people’s affliction. The emphasis in the text implies God’s personal interest in His people’s suffering. God keeps His promises.

As believers, we must not forget that God is not blind to our suffering nor unconcerned with His people’s afflictions (Matthew 10:29–31). We must trust Him in the midst of what we face,
knowing that He will deliver in due time.

In verse 8, God shares His rescue plan with Moses: He has come down to deliver His people from their slavery. God was going to do something about their suffering. He would not only remove them from oppression, but lead them to a good land, fertile and spacious but inhabited (Genesis 12:1–3). In verse 9, God reiterates that He has seen their oppression and has heard the cries of His people (Exodus 2:23–25, 3:7).

In verse 10, God tells Moses that He has chosen him to be an instrument in His hand. Moses will go to Pharaoh and will lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. In Exodus 2:11–12, Moses had rescued a Hebrew, killed an Egyptian, and fled. That time, Moses operated in his own strength. This time, his rescue mission was ordained by God.

Sometimes, we move ahead of the Lord, taking on tasks in our own strength rather than waiting to be empowered by the Lord. God called Moses to partner with Him to redeem His people from slavery.

4. God Commissions Moses (vv. 11–12)

Moses, who earlier said “Here I am,” now responds to God’s call with questions: “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh?” and “Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?” God assures Moses that He would be with him. God’s call and presence would give Moses the authority and power he would need to stand before Pharaoh and lead the people. God would not only be with Moses but also give him a sign that would prove to him that he fulfilled God’s assigned task. The people would successfully leave Egypt, come to Mount Sinai, and worship before their God. The sign would only be seen after Moses was obedient.

No matter how Moses felt about what God had called him to do, what was important was that God empowered him and would be with him to execute His plan. Moses’ success was not dependent on who he was or his ability, but his obedience and trust in God. God equips and empowers those whom He calls. For we believers whom God calls to do His work, we too must be obedient to the call and faithful to the tasks He has called us to do, knowing that He will enable us to complete them.

Search the Scriptures

1. Recount the specifics of Moses’ call. What was unusual about his experience (Exodus 13:1–6)?
2. What does the account of Moses’ call tell about God? What characteristics of God are highlighted in this story (vv. 1–12)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How do fear or feelings of inadequacy prevent us from serving the way the Lord is showing us?
2. How did God encourage Moses in his assignment? How should that promise propel us to join God in His kingdom work and help those He brings in our path?
Lesson in Our Society

The Israelites were oppressed foreigners in Egypt. Moses understood God’s holiness and surrendered to His call to help redeem the Israelites whom God called to Himself. As believers, we have to see injustice through the lens of who God is and get involved. Today, in our country and all over the world, people are being oppressed. Statistics show that approximately 27 million people are in some form of slavery today worldwide. Here in the United States, sex trafficking and other kinds of injustices are apparent in our society. How can the church get involved to help fight against such atrocities? How can you get involved to fight against injustice?

Make It Happen

Commit to pray this week, asking God to reveal to you specifically where and how you can become involved in helping those suffering and in need.
List two ways God may be signaling you to get more involved at church, in the community, or with charity to help those in need.
Partner with your church, and select one place to volunteer for a few hours.
Partner with your church outreach team, and go into the community and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

More Light on the Text

Exodus 3:1–12

1 Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.
Moses was carrying out his usual work as a shepherd. The verb translated “kept” is more literally “was shepherding” in the Hebrew (hayah ro’eh, hah-YAH ro-EH). This participle expresses the continuance of the job; it was his habitual occupation.
Moses had become the shepherd of Jethro, his father-in-law. Jethro, called Reuel (Exodus 2:18–20), is probably a title meaning “eminence” or “highness.” The story takes place many years after Moses fled from Egypt to Midian. According to Acts 7:30, it was forty years later.
One day Moses led the sheep as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. Horeb is called the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8) either because there God would reveal Himself first to Moses and then to the Israelites, or it was already known as a sacred place. Horeb and Sinai are two names for the same mountain or group of mountains (1 Kings 8:9; Nehemiah 9:13). Moses passed through the desert before reaching the pasture land of Horeb. The word “backside” (Heb. ‘akhar, ah-KHAR) can be understood as the west side of the desert—in Semitic thought, one faces east when giving compass directions so west is to one’s back. Moses did not go to Horeb, the mountain of God, with a religious intention—just to take care of his father-in-law’s flock.

2 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.
Moses was going about his usual business when God appeared to him as an “angel.” The term “angel” (Heb. mal’ak, mal-OCK) literally means “messenger.” Here, the angel is not to be
thought of as a supernatural messenger of Yahweh, but a direct manifestation of Yahweh Himself. The term is interchangeable with Yahweh (v. 4 speaks of Yahweh Himself calling out of the bush), and is a reverential way of referring to Yahweh as His appearance in patriarchal stories shows (Genesis 16:7, 18:1–2; 22:11; cf. Judges 6:12). At the same time, the angel is described as both Yahweh and yet distinguished from Him. This revelation prepares the reader of the Bible for the fuller revelation in the New Testament of God as three-in-one.

The Lord appeared to Moses as fire coming out of a bush. The term “bush” in Hebrew (Heb. seneh, seh-NEH) is similar in sound to Sinai (Heb. sinay, si-NEYE). This bush is referred to again in Deuteronomy 33:16. The Lord is called He “him that dwelt in the bush.” Fire in the Bible is often a symbol of God’s presence (Exodus 13:21, 19:18); it speaks of His holiness and His anger in relation to sin (32:10). Moses decided to investigate more closely this strange event: the bush was burning, yet not consumed. The Lord used Moses’ initial curiosity to attract him to the place.

4 And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

The transition from the angel (v. 2) to the Lord (v. 4) proves the identity of the two. This passage uses two names for God interchangeably: “LORD” (Heb. yahweh, YA-way) and “God” (Heb. elohim, eh-loh-HEEM, “deities, God”). Emphasizing the sameness of Yahweh (a personal, covenant name of God) and Elohim excludes the idea of Yahweh being only the God of Israel or merely a national God.

In a personal display, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since the patriarchs, the Lord called Moses. He communicated with him personally and called him by name. Moses responded, “Here am I” (cf. Genesis 22:1, 11; 1 Samuel 3:4–8).

5 And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

Moses was told not to come near. The phrase “draw not nigh hither” can be translated in modern language as “stop coming near, as you are doing.” Moses did not recognize the presence or nature of God. Later, after his experience with the Lord, he would be ready to draw near Him and intercede for others (see Exodus 32:30).

The Lord commanded Moses to take off his shoes. This practice, still observed in many religions, indicates the presence of God in the sanctuary (but see John 4:21–24; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Ephesians 3:14–21). Moses must take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground, made so by God’s presence. Removing shoes was intended to express not merely respect for the place itself, but was also a sign of worship, reverence, and acceptance of a servant’s position. It represented removing uncleanness caused by contact with the world, a recognition of Yahweh’s holiness.

6 Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.

The Lord explained to Moses why He had appeared to him. He was the God of Moses’ father. The term “father” (Heb. av, ‘av) has a literal and immediate meaning as well as a remote connotation; the phrase could refer to Amram (Moses’ biological father) or to all Moses’ ancestors (see Genesis 46:3; Exodus 18:4). The Lord identifies Himself as the same God who made the covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, fathers of Moses and the
Israelites. Each father stood out distinctly, as having received the promise of seed directly from God (cf. Genesis 17:16, 26:4, 28:14). Those promises are now to be fulfilled.

Moses was afraid of the sight of the holy God. No sinful man can bear the sight of God (Exodus 33:20; Numbers 4:20; Isaiah 6:2, 5). When fragile, sinful humans encounter the holy God, their initial response is terror and an attempt to hide. However, the encounter is also an event of grace bringing hope and new life (cf. Genesis 32:31; Leviticus 16:2). The same fear struck the witnesses of the glory of Jesus, manifested in His miracles, transfiguration and resurrection (cf. Matthew 17:6; Mark 4:41; Luke 24:5, 37).

7 And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;

The Lord presents Himself as someone who cares deeply, calling the Israelites “My people.” The words “have seen,” “have heard,” and “know” stress the Lord’s almost physical sensitivity toward His people. The emphasis on the pain and suffering that God has seen and heard comes through in the powerful use of Hebrew words related to physical and emotional suffering and oppression. Affliction (Heb. ‘oniy, oh-NEE, poverty, oppression) in the literal sense refers to a physical pushing down and can figuratively refer to poverty, slavery, or other oppression. The word for their taskmasters (Heb. nagas, nah-GOS, money collectors, slave drivers) also connotes a physical pushing down or against something, as if they’ve been pushed into a position of no escape. In the midst of this, God knows their sorrows (Heb. ma’kov, mah-KOVE), referring to pain that is traumatic and perhaps chronic or deadly. He saw their misery; He heard their cries. He knew their sorrows. Now, He is going to do something about it.

8 And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

Yahweh Himself, virtually in bodily form, had come down to deliver His people out the hands of the Egyptians. He would lead them to the land promised to their fathers: a good, large land, flowing with milk and honey. The expression “milk and honey” describes a land with abundant food—a prosperous and fertile land. It is a proverbial description of Canaan symbolizing continuity, stability, and identity—things that only God can give to people. Calling the land “large” (Heb. rakhav, rah-KHAV, broad, expansive, spread out) is explained by the listing of the nations occupying the territory at that time (Genesis 10:6, 15–17, 19). Yahweh repeated the fact that the cry of the people had reached Him (see v. 7). He knew of the sinful oppression by the Egyptians and the hardships to which they subjected His people.

10 Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

“Now therefore” draws the conclusion of the Lord’s speech: Moses was selected for the work of redemption. God announced that He was going to save His people through Moses, the person chosen to achieve it. Moses was called and sent to Pharaoh to bring the Lord’s people out of Egypt. God uses men and women to achieve His purposes. He does not need to do so, but He invites us to share with Him in fulfilling His plans (John 20:21). He normally works through His servants’ willing obedience.
11 And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?
Moses would have quickly welcomed the Lord’s invitation to free His people years earlier. Indeed, he had once tried to become the liberator of one Israelite from the pharaoh’s power (Exodus 2:11–14). The years of hardship and bitterness in the Midian wilderness had changed him. He was no longer bold, impetuous, and impatient, but now timid and hesitant. He had learned his own weaknesses and limitations. This is the first of Moses’ four protests against accepting the commission to lead Israel out of Egypt (cf. Exodus 4:1, 10, 13). He expressed his feeling of inadequacy and unworthiness for the task of freeing his people.

12 And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.
The Lord, in answer to Moses’ fear, told him that He Himself would be with him. Where Moses’ abilities might fail would be a God of unlimited abilities. What Moses desired was assurance that God had truly sent him. The Lord offered Moses a sign or token (Heb. ‘ot, OTE). The word “sign” covers a variety of events and phenomena in the Bible and should not be restricted to a narrow meaning. A sign is often a natural occurrence or supernatural phenomenon that confirms the truth of what is said by God or a prophet (see 1 Samuel 10:7, 9; 2 Kings 19:29). Here, the sign was that Moses’ success in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt would prove the Lord was with him; they would serve God on this same mountain. In other words, the purpose of his mission would be accomplished. Moses received the guarantee that Yahweh was truly the One who sent him. The “I” in “I have sent thee” is emphatic.
The Israelites would serve God on His mountain. “To serve” (Heb. ‘avad, ah-VAD) has the meaning of both service and worship. The service offered to God is not a bondage, but rather a joyous, liberating experience. The Israelites, by being free of Pharaoh’s yoke, would not enter into a state of anarchy, but use their new freedom to serve God under a covenantal law. They would pass from slavery in service of Pharaoh to the liberty of the service to God—a major theme of the Exodus.

Say It Correctly

Midian. MI-dee-an.
Theos. theh-OC-E.
Phainein. FEYE-nane.
Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY
Insist on Justice for All
(Exodus 23:1–9)

TUESDAY
Eternal Cost of Not Offering Justice
(Matthew 25:41–46)

WEDNESDAY
No Perversion of Justice Allowed
(2 Chronicles 19:4–7)

THURSDAY
Persist until Justice is Done
(Luke 18:1–8)

FRIDAY
Deacons Called to Ministry of Justice
(Acts 6:1–7)

SATURDAY
Israelites Meet God at Mount Sinai
(Exodus 19:1–9)

SUNDAY
Moses and the Burning Bush
(Exodus 3:1–12)