

THE NAMING OF THE NAME

By David H. Roper

We are continuing in our studies of Old and New Testament characters, seen against their time. Last week we talked about Abraham and his call to be a blessing in the midst of his time. Today we want to look at the call and commission of Moses, as it is found in the third chapter of Exodus. Let me give you a bit of historical background to provide the setting.

About fifty years before Moses was born, the Egyptians drove from the land of Egypt a group of foreign kings called Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings, who the Egyptians came to despise. The Hyksos had come from Syria and Palestine, and for about two hundred years these Asiatics had dominated Egyptian politics. As a result of their domination, Egyptians came to hate Asiatics, people from the area of Syria and Palestine, and particularly shepherds. These people were semi-nomadic, and so they were despised.

As a result of the rule of the Hyksos, the Egyptians instituted two national policies. One was that of expansion. They were determined to drive these people out of their borders, so they conquered all of Syria and Palestine. Then they turned their attention inward to the elements of Semitic or Asiatic life within Egypt. The people who were most nearly identified with the Hyksos were the children of Israel. They were living in the same general area, the Nile Delta; and because they, like the Hyksos, were Asiatic, the Egyptians decided to exterminate them. As you know, their policy was one of both extermination and oppression. As the nation multiplied, the Egyptians decided to destroy them by killing their newborn children.

It was during this time that Moses was born. I am sure you know the account. He is described in Exodus as a beautiful child. That description is interpreted in Acts as "beautiful to God". God saw him in a very special way and had a particular task for this child. Out of faith, his mother, Jochebed, prepared a little papyrus ark for him and placed him in the Nile. Under the providence of God, the Nile carried him into the arms of the daughter of the Pharaoh, whom we know was Hatshepsut. She became one of the most powerful women in Egyptian history. She actually became a pharaoh and ruled from twenty to twenty-five years, adopting male dress and even wearing a false beard. She ruled over both Lower and Upper Egypt, and perhaps was one of the most powerful women in history. This was God's way of providing for his man Moses.

It is ironic that the means the Egyptians employed to exterminate the Israelites became the means for their deliverance. It was the decree to destroy the children that resulted in Moses being taken into the Pharaoh's household. For about forty years he was trained in the Egyptian court. He received the very best training available. He was placed in the hands of special scribes in the court, trained as a mathematician, trained in military strategy, chemistry, medicine, and he learned a very complicated hieroglyphic system of writing that took years to master. Moses was trained in every way as a leader; he received the very best that Egypt could offer. Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us that at one time Moses was a general in the Egyptian army and conquered the land of Ethiopia for Egypt. It was there he gained his Ethiopian wife, who his sister Miriam later despised.

We know something of the philosophies of Egypt at that time. Egypt was in a depression when Abraham went there; but at the time of Moses, Egypt was ascending and becoming the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. Its kingdom extended from the Euphrates down into Ethiopia. Egypt had colonies on Cyprus, and throughout the Aegean Sea. Egyptians believed in their strength. In fact, their monuments make statement to that effect. "He trusted in his strength" reads a statement referring to some of the Pharaohs. One Pharaoh was interred with his bow, and inscribed on the bow was this statement: "No other man could draw this bow." The Egyptian philosophy was "Mucho macho". Strength, power, might, makes right.

That was the environment Moses was raised in, so you can see something of his thinking as he went out and saw an Egyptian mistreating one of his brothers, a fellow-Hebrew. We know that the Egyptians were very cruel. Pictured on their monuments are slave masters beating slaves. They were a very cruel, harsh people. When Moses saw one of his brothers being mistreated, he acted in the way that he felt was most appropriate. He wanted to set things right. He was the redeemer. And, as you know, he set God's program back forty years. He went out with all his strength and all his power, and the net result was frustration--both for his people and for himself. The Israelites remained in bondage another forty years.

Do you ever feel that way? You set out to right some wrong, and the result is frustration and destruction. You end up like Moses, sitting at a well in Midian, wondering, "What in the world did I do wrong? My heart was right. I put everything I had into it, and the result is negative, destructive.

The issue was this: Moses had learned what he needed to learn in Egypt. There was nothing wrong with the instruction he received there. It was necessary, I believe, in terms of his leadership. To lead two to three million people through the Sinai Peninsula into the Promised Land required that education. His education was not to be despised; it was in the providence of God. But Egypt had taught Moses all that it could teach him; now God had to teach him something entirely different, something new, that he could only learn through loneliness, humiliation, misery, and despair.

Thus begins the second forty years of Moses' life. He had spent forty years in training in the Egyptian court, and then spent forty years training under God's hand in the Sinai desert. For forty years Moses herded sheep. Moses was a cattleman and despised sheep, I am sure. He was lonely and homesick. He named one of his children Gershom, which means "a stranger there". I do not think he was referring to the fact that he was a stranger in Midian, for he would have used a word that means "a stranger here". He was referring to his relationship with the people in Egypt. He was forgotten, a stranger; no one knew him in Egypt. Forty years is a long time. Most of us have not even lived that long. My family took the tour at Alcatraz yesterday, and they told us of the Birdman of Alcatraz, who spent 39 years in solitary confinement. Well, Moses was in the desert one year more than the Birdman of Alcatraz was in solitary.

There is every indication that his marriage was unhappy. Perhaps he felt that finding a wife in Midian would somehow take away the pain. But Zipporah comes across throughout the pages of history as a very tyrannical, hostile woman. In fact, during one of the most trying periods of Moses' life, he had to send her home. She was a burden to him. His father-in-law, Reuel (also called Jethro), was not a great deal of help, either. It was a terrible, terrible time for Moses.

There is nothing joyful about being in the wilderness for forty years; but it was God's time. Moses learned through that experience something he could not have learned any other way. We need to take that to heart. If you are going through circumstances that are reminiscent of Moses' circumstances, it is because God has something to teach you that he cannot teach you any place else.

Chapter 2, verses 23-25, tells us that another king had risen in Egypt, and by this time oppression was a national policy.

And the sons of Israel sighed because of their bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

His covenant was the promise that, through Abraham, he would make a great nation of them, and he would give them a land, and that through the patriarchs would come the seed who would bless the world.

And God saw the sons of Israel [literally, God knew], and God took notice of them.

So, if you find yourself where the children of Israel were, remember that God sees, and God knows. So he sets about, as recorded in chapter 3, to send the deliverer to bring his people out of bondage. At this point, Moses was

anything but willing to go.

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the 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 blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

Probably the bush was one of those gnarled acacia trees that grow in the desert. There was nothing particularly spectacular about the bush except that the angel of the Lord appeared in the midst of it.

So Moses said, "I must turn aside now, and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." [Moses thought he was forgotten, but God knew him, and God saw.] Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Moses thought it was desert; God said it was holy ground. In the East they wore shoes or sandals to protect their feet from defilement, and when they walked into a holy place they would take off their shoes in order not to defile that place. God said, "The place you are standing is holy." Moses said, "I've been herding sheep here for forty years."

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. And the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. And now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

Two important things are brought out in this passage. First, God says, "I will deliver my people" and "I'm going to do it through you." Verse 8, "I have come down to deliver them..." and verse 10, "Therefore, come now, and I will send you..." That is the only way God chooses to work--through people. He does not fly Gospel Blimps; he works through people. And he works through weak, inadequately prepared, ill-equipped people, because that is the only kind of people he can find. No one could have been prepared to take on this task. Not a man on the face of the earth, not even Moses, with all his training, would have been trained adequately to fulfill that task. The king of Egypt at this time was a man named Amenhotep II, who lived in an immense complex at Thebes, a complex much bigger than the Oakland Coliseum. And Moses was a bit out of practice. After forty years he had forgotten the court protocol. He was not ready to walk into a situation like that and proclaim that he was the deliverer.

Secondly, God (who is never embarrassed to call us to do the impossible) reminds Moses that he is to deliver the children of Israel out of Egypt into Canaan. The problem was that the Egyptians had conquered Canaan. Not only were the Hittites and the Perizzites and all these other "ites" in the land, but the Egyptians were there, too. The pharaohs who had preceded Amenhotep II had conquered all Assyria and Palestine. To deliver the nation of Israel out of Egypt into Canaan would be to take them from the frying pan to the fire. There was hardly any place on earth where there were not any Egyptians. Besides, he had to take two and a half million people. That is something like twice the population of San Francisco County. If you were to march that many people in a column of fours, they would stretch for three hundred and seventy miles. That is a lot of people to feed and protect. And they came with their dogs, cats, parakeets, senior citizens, little children, their mattresses, and all their goods. And remember, they were slaves. They didn't have an army. The task was impossible. No one was equipped for a task like that. And God says, "Moses, I'm calling you. I'm going to deliver my people, and you are going to do it." So it is understandable that Moses would say, in verse 11,

"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of

Egypt?"

I am convinced that if God had appeared to Moses forty years before and handed him this challenge, Moses would have said, "I'm your man." But by this time in his life he was convinced that he had nothing to bring to this situation. He did not know who he was. Today we would say that he had an identity problem. He had no sense of worth, no value, no resources.

Interestingly enough, God does not tell Moses who he is. We would. If someone comes to us and says, "I'm not qualified to do a certain thing," we say, "Oh, yes you are!" We bring out all the statistics. Here are your assets over here, and your liabilities here; these are the things that you have done, and, if you apply yourself, you can do it. You have the gifts, the training, the ability, the personality. You can do it. On that basis we decide what things we can do and what things we cannot do. If we are not equipped, then we are disqualified. We will not touch anything we are not qualified for. But if we are adequately trained and equipped, then we will tackle it. But notice that God does not tell Moses who he is; God just says, "I am with you."

And he said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain [that is, Sinai]."

God says two things: I will be with you, and there will be no proof that I am with you until the deed is done. You have to act now; the certainty comes later. We want God to vouchsafe his promises to us so that we can venture ourselves without any step of faith. God says, "I'm not going to do that. All you have is my word. I will be with you. Literally, "I am with you." That is all Moses needs. That is the answer to Moses' question. He does not need to know who he is; all he needs to know is that God is with him. Therefore, he is adequate for whatever he needs to face--even the impossible. Moses has another question in verse 13,

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

Moses' first question is, "Who am I?" and God says, "It doesn't matter; I am with you." Moses' second question is, "Well then, who are you? It's nice to know that you're going along, but so what?" The question that Moses asks is not, "What is your name?" Moses knew the name of the Lord, the Covenant God of Israel, was Jehovah, or Yahweh. All Israel knew that. That name was revealed to the patriarchs. What he did not know was the meaning of the name. The interrogative pronoun that he uses means, "explain to me the meaning of the name." So God explains that his name means "I AM." The name Jehovah or Yahweh is the third-person singular form of a verb that means "he is". God says, "I am. I am whatever you need. That is why it is important that I go with you. You don't need to reckon on your resources; whatever you need, that is what I am. Do you need courage? I am courage. Do you need wisdom? That is what I am. Whatever resource you are lacking, that is what I am. Therefore, tell them I AM sent you." That ought to be the pattern of our life (verse 15).

"Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations."

This is the way we ought to approach every problem. He is. I am not, but he is; therefore, I am. Whatever I need, that is what God is. Moses is told that he is to go to the elders and deliver this message. Together they are to go to the king of Egypt and request that they be allowed to go into the wilderness for a three days' journey to sacrifice to the Lord. But he is told in advance that the king of Egypt will not let them go. Moses still has a problem. He actually did not hear what the Lord said. The Lord described what would happen during the next few months. Moses would go to the elders and they would go with him to the Pharaoh, and the Pharaoh would not let them go. But God said the Pharaoh would be compelled to let them go, and Moses would deliver the people. But Moses is still hung up on the first statement, "You'll go to the elders." Even though God told Moses He is sufficient to meet his needs, Moses thinks, "The elders won't believe me. Who am I? If they remember me at all, it will be as the

man who got them into so much trouble before. They won't believe that I have the credentials to deliver my people." Have you ever felt that way? "I really don't have the authority to expect anyone to believe me or to listen. If I just had better training, or if I was a little brighter, if I could just lose a little weight, then people would listen to me. If I had just a little better position in life, a little better paying job, a little more education, people would listen to me." When God raises this issue, he does not go into his background to remind Moses that he has the equivalent of a PhD. He does something else (verse 2, chapter 4)

And the Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail." [not normally the way to pick up a snake]--so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand [from this point on this is always referred to as the staff of God]--"that they might 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." And the Lord furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom." So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, it was leprous like snow. Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again; and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. "And it shall come about that if they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign. But it shall be that if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

These three signs are designated in this passage as a voice. If you have an American Standard translation, you will note that in the margin, under side note 2, verse 8, is the word "voice". These miraculous signs were God's voice to the people. They were God's affirmation that Moses was the man God had called. God says that the sign of authority, the credential in our life, is the capacity to do supernatural, extraordinary things that no one else can do, that cannot be explained on the basis of our education or our personality. There was nothing in Moses' past that would equip him to turn the water of the Nile into blood. The court wizards could accomplish the first sign, but not the second or third signs. No one in all the history of mankind has ever been able to cure leprosy. Moses was able to do something that no one had ever done before.

God says that the thing that will make people listen to you is not your office, education, or personality, but your capacity, as you act in faith, to do these extraordinary things. If you can be poised and restful and peaceful in the midst of this age, it is not that you do not understand the situation; it is that you are tied into a source of power that no one else has. If you can be peaceful and restful and quiet when your business is falling apart financially, your home is going to pieces, your kids are bombarded on every side by every conceivable evil influence, there is something extraordinary about you. People will wonder, "What is it that makes that person respond that way?" The great miracle today is not walking on water or turning staffs into serpents; it is a supernatural quality of life that is the result of our awareness that God is.

The pharisees asked Jesus, "What shall we do to do the works of God?" Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe on me whom he has sent." Keep on believing; keep on acting out of my strength; keep on relying upon me. The result, Jesus said, is that you will do the works of God. That is the only way to do God's works. How audacious of us to think that we can do God's works by our own strength. The only one who can do God's works is God. So as we count on him, people will look at our lives and see the work of God in us. They will see God-likeness in the midst of a world that is disintegrating. That will be our authority. We cannot say, "I'm disqualified because I don't have the right background, or my appearance is all wrong." Our authority resides in our faith, and that is what will compel our hearers.

Moses has another problem in verse 10.

Then Moses said to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of

tongue."

Moses says that he has never been able to express himself clearly. He may have had a speech impediment. He was fearful lest that inhibit him so that he is unable to fulfill the commission. God says, "That's no problem to me. In fact, that deficiency is a created deficiency. I'm the one who made you that way" (verse 11).

And the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."

God says, "I know you are slow of speech. I made you that way, because it is when you are weak that you are strong." Paul highlights this strange paradox in 2 Corinthians. Paul had a similar affliction, in his case probably an eye disease that was terribly disabling. He thought, "If I could just get rid of this thing, then I would have power, then my life would really count." So he besought the Lord to take the affliction away, and the Lord said, "No. Because my strength is made perfect in your weakness." So Paul says, "Therefore I am well content with weakness.. .for when I am weak, then I am strong." That does not mean we have to go about saying we are weak; but it is where we begin. I am weak. God is. Therefore I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. There is no task, no assignment, that is beyond his resources.

Moses has one final problem in verse 13.

But he said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever Thou wilt."

This sounds very pious, but Moses is not volunteering. This is the Hebrew idiom that means, "Send somebody else." Verse 14 says,

Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses...

God was not angry when Moses felt weak, when he felt unequipped, when he lacked the credentials, when he felt impotent. That was no problem to God. What tied God's hands was when Moses said, "I'm simply not available; send somebody else." The great thing about this passage is that God does not leave it there. He goes on to say that he would use Moses as God in Aaron's life; he would send Aaron as Moses' associate, and Aaron would be the spokesman. God would speak through Moses, through Aaron.

The passage goes on to tell us that Moses departed and went back to Egypt. God not only is determined to fulfill all of his expectations in us; but he also will see to it that we make ourselves available. He will not rest until we are willing to submit. God did not write Moses off. He did not set him aside and say, "All right, I'll find somebody else." He said, "I'll see to it that Moses does what I called him to do." So he set him on the road to Egypt. From the book of Exodus we learn what this man accomplished. He is THE leader of Israel. Jews look back to Moses today as the great leader, the one around whom the nation was formed. Where did his resources come from? Where did his power to accomplish those deeds come from? It came from the God who is.

Most of you are facing some circumstance this week that is way beyond your powers. If you are not, God will see to it that you do. God is not frustrated by your lack of knowledge, or your feelings or weakness. The only thing that will frustrate him is if you say, "I'm just not available." Ian Thomas, in commenting on this passage, refers to the fact that God appeared to Moses in a common, ordinary bush, an acacia tree--not a palm tree, just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill, garden variety desert bush. The point is that any old bush will do, as long as God is in it. What has God called you to do this week? Remember, he is. He is everything you need. And therefore you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

It is good to be reminded again, Father, that we are related to the One who sees, and who knows, and who is, and that it is your delight to equip us for every good work. Thank you for creating us to that end. Thank you in Christ's name, Amen.