

The Burning Bush: Nec tamen Consumebatur

Exodus 3:1-12

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 3, as we come to that incident of the burning bush. This is for the second consecutive week a pivotal passage pregnant with meaning in the Exodus story, a section that records the call of Moses into service as the deliverer of God's people. But before we get to that story, we perhaps needs to remember some of the themes we've already seen. Already in Exodus, chapter 1, we've seen the deliberate way that Moses links creation and redemption. God's work of redemption is just as great and broad a work as is his work of creation, in the repetition of the phrase "fruitful and multiplied" several times in Exodus, chapter 1, Moses ties in what God is doing in the Exodus with the creation account itself. We also have seen God's sovereignty emphasized in Exodus, chapters 1 and 2. He is sovereign over against Pharaoh. He uses second causes. His providence is in complete control. At the very beginning of Exodus, chapter 1 we saw it emphasize that God is making. He's creating a people for Himself in redemption, and it's stressed in several ways that the plan of God in redemption in the Exodus is simply carrying out things that he had already promised to the patriarchs before. So that His covenant of grace, His plan of salvation is the same in all ages.

And then, of course, we have been focusing upon this great contest that is developing. It will eventually be at a human level between Moses and Pharaoh, or at the broader level between Israel and Egypt. But behind that and more significant than that human contest is this divinely initiated contest between God and Pharaoh and perhaps we could say even behind that between God and Satan and the forces of hell against the people of God. And this contest is going to be one in which God displays His power and His glory. Now the last time we were together, we were looking at Exodus, chapter 2, verses 23 through 25 in which we are told what God's heart was for His people as He looked down upon their oppression. And we are told specifically that as He saw them He had compassion for them, He heard their cries, and He answered them because they were the nicest people on earth. No, he answered them because of the promise that He had made to Abraham. In His love He had made a promise to Abraham, even in that promise that He had made to Abraham, He had told Abraham that his descendants would be held in captivity, but that they would be brought out.

And because of His promise, God responds to His people's cry, and He begins to put in place their redemption. As we saw that, it became very clear to us that before the cries of Israel ever came up to God, before the people finally turned to God to lift up their voices to Him in the midst of their oppression, God was already working to bring relief to that oppression. And that story continues to be carried out tonight. So let's hear God's word here in Exodus 3, beginning inverse 1:

Our Lord and our God, teach us Your truth, show us Your way. Reveal Your gospel to us. Show us Yourself, humble us, encourage us, train us up, even as we attend this, Your inspired word. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's set the table first. Look back at verses 24 and 25 of Exodus, chapter 2. When you read those last two verses of Exodus 2, "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them," it does at least two things. First of all those verses confirm the unity of God's plan, the unity of His covenant of grace. Israel's Exodus from Egypt is God's fulfillment of His promises to the patriarchs. God isn't initiating a new plan here, never heard of before, never put in place before, He is simply fulfilling what He has already told to the patriarchs in Genesis. So when God hears His people's groans, He recalls His covenant with Abraham and God's emancipation of Israel from Egypt was part of His perfect, eternal plan, and part of the blessings promised in that relationship that He had established with Abraham. It's very important for us to appreciate the continuity of what God is doing under the old covenant. There are some people that like to view what God is doing as if it were in distinct boxes totally unrelated to what He was doing before. As if God deals one way, and then His people fail in that way, and He sets them another way, and He deals with them for that way, and then they fail, and then He starts over again, and you get plan A and B and C and D and E. Well, what we see here very clearly in Exodus 2:24 is that God is not instituting plan B in the Exodus. This is part of plan A. God knew this all along. He had told Abraham about it all along, and now He's carrying out the plan that He had told them to expect all along. That's the first thing that strikes you, the unity of God's covenant of grace. The unity of His plan of redemption.

The second thing, however, that strikes you is this. After you hear about God hearing the groaning of Israel and remembering His covenant with Abraham, and taking notice of the children of Israel, it leaves you waiting expectantly. You're thinking well, what's God going to do next? And here's your answer. In Exodus, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12, the next thing that God does is He reveals Himself to a man that He has chosen to be the deliverer of His people. That's the next thing that God does in the process of redeeming His people, revealing Himself to a man who will be the human deliverer of His people.

Now, there are lots of legitimate ways to divide the passage before us. I'm going to divide it in four parts tonight, just for the sake of digesting some of its rich truth.

In verses 1 through 3 we see Moses initial encounter with God at the burning bush. But in verses 1 through 3 Moses doesn't quite know yet what he's looking at. He's curious, but he doesn't know yet that this is a manifestation of God. In verses 4 through 6 we see the rest of the story in Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Now he knows who it is, and you will notice his reaction in verses 4 through 6 is very different than his reaction in verses 1 through 3, precisely because he knows who he is dealing with now. When you get to verses 7 through 10 you see God announcing to Moses his concern for Israel. You already know how God feels about Israel because you have had the blessing of hearing Exodus 2, 23 through 25. Moses is hearing it for the first time. Moses is now going to hear God's heart for His people, and then having heard God's heart for His people, in verse 10 God is going to call Moses to go be their deliverer. And then finally in verses 11 and 12 Moses will raise his first objection to this particular vocation, and we will hear an absolutely mind-boggling response from God to Moses. Let's look at those four sections together.

I. Moses encounters God.

First, verses 1 through 3 where we see Moses unexpected and strange encounter with God before he realizes who it is. In these verses God reveals Himself to Moses visibly via what theologians called a theophany. This word simply reflects a manifestation of God, a visible manifestation of God. God reveals Himself to Moses visibly via a theophany, and Moses' response is to be curious. In verse 1, we find Moses shepherding a flock. How the mighty have fallen. This was a prince of Egypt. He was one who had a feeling that God was perhaps calling him to be a deliverer of His people. Now he is the son-in-law of a Midianite priest, and he's herding a flock. Now the reason that hurts so much is because you've already heard from Joseph in Genesis, chapter 46, verse 34 that Egyptians loathed flock herders. And so Moses has gone from the height of society, from the Egyptian perspective, to the absolute depth, and yet that's where he is. And it's interesting that when Moses engages God or when God engages Moses in this encounter, Moses is not out on some sort of a religious quest or pilgrimage. He's doing something very mundane. He's out herding that flock, pasturing that flock.

It's interesting as well, notice what we're told that he leads the flock to the west side of the wilderness. Literally that phrase is that he led the flock to the backside of the wilderness. Now the interesting thing about that is the directions throughout this passage are clearly Semitic. In other words, the directions that are given for us as to where Moses is and where he's going are given not from an Egyptian perspective, but from a Semitic perspective. The backside of the wilderness is for the Semite who lives on the other side of the Red Sea the west side of the wilderness. And so we are being told this story from the Semitic perspective. Notice also that the words for the mountain to which Moses goes are used interchangeably in various parts. Here in verse 1 we are told that he

goes to Horeb. Later, we'll be told he's at Sinai. Those terms are used interchangeably. We don't know exactly why. If anybody tells you they know why, they don't. There are lots of good guesses as to why. It has been suggested that Horeb is the Semitic word and Sinai comes from somewhere else. There have been all manner of suggestions that Horeb refers to the range of mountains, that Sinai refers to the specific mountain, but no one knows exactly. They're just used interchangeably.

Furthermore, in this passage if you look at the end of verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2, the words *God* and *Lord* are both used to refer to the God of Israel. It will be so throughout the book of Exodus. And in Exodus, chapter 6, there will be a very important passage which explains the meaning of the word "Lord." But for now God simply is the generic ascription of deity to God. It comes from El, the El of power, the one who is the almighty one. It's the generic reference to God. Lord is the name of the God of Israel, which He will uniquely reveal to Moses. But both of these terms are used for the God of Israel. At any rate, we find here Moses in verse 1 out on a mundane, secular task when he unwittingly stumbles into an encounter with God.

Indeed, in verse 2 we are told that the angel of the Lord appeared to him, even though Moses realized that this is the angel of the Lord, until verses 4 through 6. For now, Moses is curious, and he's curious because of what he saw. There is a bush burning, but it's not being burned up. The bush is ablaze, but the leaves and the stems are not being consumed. And Moses is curious about this. And so he wants to investigate. What is this strange sight, he says. And he begins to make his way towards the bush. Why the fiery bush? Again, we don't know exactly. It's been suggested that that fiery bush may well be a symbol of the experiences of God's people in Egypt. They were going through the trial by fire as it were, but they were not being consumed. It's also been suggested that perhaps this is a picture of the way that God is going to bring them out of Egypt. They are going to go through many trials, but they won't be consumed. Perhaps the most straight forward answer though is that the fire is a symbol of the presence, purity and holiness of God. It is so all the way back in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 24 when God places the cherubim at the gate with the fiery swords to guard the entrance to Eden, marking His holiness and His presence, and cutting off man from encounter with Him. And of course in Exodus, chapter 19, verse 18, again the fire will be a symbol of the presence of God. And as the pillar of fire follows the children of Israel in their wanderings, it is explicitly said to be a sign of the presence of God. And so we have here a manifestation of the holy God. By the way, that little Latin phrase which you may have been scratching your heard about in the sermon title, *Nec tamen Consumebatur*, you Latin scholars out there, and I know there are some of you because I see the prizes that you win in the newspaper from time to time, know that that's just a simple little phrase that comes from the Latin Vulgate *Nec not, tamen however, Consumebatur*, the present, passive participle of "it is not being consumed." Not, however, is it being consumed. And so this refers to the bush itself. It was a

motto that was taken by the Scottish church and persecution and applied to the church. The church was going through the fires of persecution but it was not, however, being consumed. And so this strange sight draws Moses towards the bush. What's going on here? Well, God is drawing near to Moses, and revealing Himself to Him. God always has to take the initiative in revealing Himself to His people, but we learn several other things about God in this very passage. First of all we learn that God is a spirit, and He's not tied to some specific place. He can encounter His people in the most unlikely places. We don't know where this mountain is. It's interesting that neither did the later Israelites. The only time we're told about somebody going back to this mountain later in the Old Testament is Elijah. As far as we know, even the later Israelites didn't know where the mountain of Moses was, and they didn't care, because there was nothing sacred about the place. It was the presence of God that made the place sacred. And so we see a beautiful, if I might speak anachronistically, a beautiful reformed doctrine of place. There's nothing holy about a place. There's something holy about God's presence. There's nothing sacred about that mountain which would have led Moses to go there. It's that God was there; that's what made it holy.

Secondly, I want you to note, and we'll carry this through as we look at verses 4 through 6, but the true revelation of God to Moses is not going to be the vision of the burning bush, it's going to be what God speaks to Moses. In other words, the true revelation was in God's word, not in the sight of the burning bush. Somewhere down the line if you're in a Bible overview class in college one day, or if you run into someone who has been in a Bible overview class, and thus has all knowledge, you're going to hear someone tell you that God's word is a collection of revelations or existential encounters wherein a person has an experience of the presence of God, and then sits down and writes about them. This encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush is therefore the real revelation. What Moses writes about it is simply his human reflections on that encounter they will tell you. Now I want you to understand that from the standpoint of the Bible, that's got it exactly opposite. Moses is left curious by what he sees. He is not left curious after God speaks. God's word is the real revelation, and what Moses writes about the encounter is not his fallible human reflection on it, it is what God Himself has said. So when God encounters you, He always encounters you by His word. That is how He reveals Himself. And so this great event of Israel's fate takes place on foreign soil, just like Abram's call. And later Israel isn't attached to the place or the site that it happened, because the place and the site aren't the significant thing. It's that God was there at that moment, and it became a holy place, as He revealed Himself to Moses, visibly in the theophany and also by His word. Now let me say one last thing about this passage. The phrase "angel of the Lord" is used in verse 2. It is clearly linked with God Himself in verses 4 through 6. The angel of the Lord is probably a reverential way of referring to the one true God. We know that Israelites didn't like to simply use God's name in a flippant way. And certainly since there is a visible manifestation of God being made here, Moses wants to be careful as to

how he speaks about this God who is manifesting himself in a visible form, because we know that the God of Israel is spirit, He's invisible, you can't see Him. He doesn't have a body. And so the phrase "angel of the Lord" is used here to refer reverently to God manifesting Himself. But our church fathers from the earliest days of the church have recognized that in this manifestation, what we have is Christ in His office as mediator, the second person of the trinity, manifesting Himself to His people. The angel of the Lord coming down in the midst of His people to manifest Himself in the midst of His redeeming plan for them.

II. The true revelation of God to Moses is spoken.

Now, let's look at verses 4 through 6. The encounter heightens. Moses encounters God. God reveals Himself to Moses, but this time in verses 4 through 6, he does so by His word, by His command, by His promise. Now Moses is not merely curious, he is awed. Moses encounter with the self-revealed God here is through His word, and it brings about a corresponding fear of God. The call of Moses in verse 4, parallels the calls of Abraham and Jacob. Notice the words. "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 Moses responds, "Here I am." Same thing happens with Abraham in Genesis 22:11. Same thing happens with Jacob in Genesis 46:2. Similar things will happen to Gideon in the book of Judges, and to Jeremiah. "Moses, Moses," emphatic. "Here I am," response. In fact, there are actually six components of this that can be identified if you want to go look at the story of Gideon's call, and Jeremiah's call and see how it's worked out. But God, notice immediately in verse 5, commands Moses to stop coming near him. Not because God is ultimately unapproachable by His people.

But look at two things. Moses must not approach God before he knows exactly who he is approaching. And God will identify Himself as the God of His Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before Moses can approach. Moses needs to know who it is, who he is approaching. Before you can approach God and worship, you must know who He is. Secondly, Moses must not approach God until God gives him the instruction as to how he is to approach Him. So he must approach the one true God, and he must approach the one true God the way the one true God tells him to approach Him. Is that not a pyridine of the essence of what it is to worship God? God must reveal Himself to you, and then God must tell you how you should approach Him in worship. And that's exactly what we see here in Exodus, chapter 3. In verse 5, God tells Moses to take his sandals from his feet. This was a sign of reverence and humility in the near east. We don't know exactly where the origin of this is. We do know that as late as Luke, chapter 15, you are told that slaves didn't wear shoes. And so perhaps the sign of taking on the sandals is literally a sign of 'I'm servant, you're Lord. I'm the slave, you're the master.' It's an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and our humility. We also know that ancient Samaritan priests actually disrobed when

they served their gods. And even the priests of Israel disrobed, leaving on their linen skirts, or kilts, as they served in the house of the Lord. Whatever the case is, of the origin of this custom, it's clearly a sign of reverence and humility.

And notice again that the ground is holy, not because of the sight, but because of the presence of God. This is the first time that the word holy is used in the Bible, and it's used in direct connection with God. There is a great deal of significance in that. But it's not that there is a wholly sight, it's that there is a wholly God-presence that makes the ground wholly. The nations around Israel believed in holy trees and holy bushes, and holy sights, and holy places. Israel didn't. But the place is holy because God is there. That's always the way it is in true worship.

In verse 6 God goes on to identify Himself as the God of the patriarchs, not a new and different and heretofore unknown God, but He is the God who had revealed Himself previously to the patriarchs and now is revealing Himself more clearly than ever before. But the emphasis throughout this section is that God is known by His own initiative, and He is known by His word. He cannot be approached apart from His word. In Exodus 3, we are reminded that our knowledge of God is dependent upon His revealing Himself. There, God discloses His character to Moses through a physical manifestation, and He reveals Himself in the burning bush which is not consumed. But ultimately He reveals Himself by giving His name in word to Moses. And here again we are reminded that God has to take initiative if we are going to enter into a relationship with Him, if we are going to worship Him. If He is going to be known personally, if He is going to be known savingly, then He must make Himself known to us; not only because of the distance between the creature and the creator, we can't apprehend Him. We're finite. He's not. But because of the moral difference between Him and ourselves. Our sin and it's blinding moral effects make it impossible for us to work our way back or up to a saving knowledge of God. He must come to us and reveal Himself. By the way, that's one reason we always start our worship services with a scriptural call to worship. That's a reminder that God must call His people into worship if we are going to be able to enter into a relationship with Him, and worship. By His word, He calls us into worship and fellowship.

III. God's concern for Israel.

Then in verses 7 through 10 we see something else. God announces His concern for Israel, and He gives His call to Moses. As we've already mentioned, we've already been told about God's concern for His people in Exodus, chapter 2, verses 23 through 25. But now God is going to reveal that fact to Moses. Isn't it interesting that in this passage God Himself is depicted as a divine messenger. He is the angel of the Lord. He is the messenger of the Lord. So God, the divine messenger, the divine revealer, the one who reveals Himself, is now preparing

Moses to be an earthly messenger. And what's Moses' job going to be? It's going to be to parallel what God has just done. Even as God has revealed Himself to Moses, what's Moses supposed to do? Reveal himself to Israel and reveal himself to Pharaoh. God is going to display Himself, and He's going to use Moses to do it. And so in preparing Moses to be a messenger, the very first thing that He does is He shares His heart with Moses. Moses, let me tell you about My heart for My people. I've seen them, I have given heed to them. I am coming down.

Those are the three things he says. I have seen the oppression that they are enduring. I have given heed to their cries, and I am coming down to help. He's sharing His heart with Moses so that Moses can share His heart with the people of God. Because Moses' job is going to be a human revealer of God to his people. But he needs God's word first before he can reveal God's heart to his people. And then God gives Moses a three-part description of the land that he's going to take his people to. Look at verse 8. After telling Moses that He's going to redeem Israel from Egypt, He says specifically, I want you to tell them this. I'm going to give them a land. Now remember these are slaves. They own no land. So He's telling them, I'm going to give them a land, and I'm going to tell you about the land that they're going to get. This land is a fruitful land, and it is a spacious land. We're told it is a good and a spacious land. Over and over, we're told that the land of Goshen is spacious, but you know, we're told that the land is good, but we're never told that the land of Goshen is spacious. So God is telling Israel, look, I'm going to give you a land that's fruitful like Goshen, like the land that you've been living in; but it's going to be spacious. How appealing that would have been to a semi-Nomadic people who wanted space. They're going to have a spacious land. Secondly, He says not only is it good and spacious, it is flowing with milk and honey. Even Egyptian descriptions of the hill country of Palestine confirmed this. It's a rich and fruitful land. And thirdly, it is a place where the Canaanites are; it is a place where the Hitittes and the Amorites and the Perizzites and Hivites and the Jebusites. In fact six nations live there. Now this statement does two things. First of all, it confirms just how spacious this land is. If six nations are living there now, this must be a really spacious land. But secondly, it takes us all the way back to Genesis, chapter 15, verses 18 and following where God said to Abraham, "Know that your descendants are going to be held in a land which is not there. But I'm going to bring them out when the iniquity of the Amorite is complete. And I going to bring them in and I'm going to give them the land of the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Perrizite, and the Hivite, and the Hittite and the Jebusite. In fact, he names four other 'ites' as well in that passage. And there are different numbers of them named in different places, and again we don't know exactly why. Some are selected, and some are not. But the point is this. God is going to give a land that belongs to other peoples to the children of Israel. And so this message Moses is to take back to the people. He's to reveal God to them, he's to tell them about what God is going to do for them, not only in delivering them, but giving them a land, giving them a place.

And then in verse 10 God commissions Moses to the work. Therefore, come now, I will send you to Pharaoh so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel out of Egypt. Moses is commissioned there, by the way, just like Christ commissions the apostles in John 20:21. He is told that he is to go to Pharaoh, and he is to bring the children of Israel out. One of the things that we learn here, we're going to learn it very quickly with Moses' response, is that God uses in His wisdom means or instruments, human instruments to accomplish His will. In this case, He's appointing Moses as a human mediator, as a human leader and deliverer for His people, but God Himself remains the ultimate deliverer of His people. God Himself is the one upon whom all these plans depend. The human instruments of God's will are replaceable. But God will accomplish His will. He uses Moses, but it is God who will deliver His people. That is the lesson that Moses is going to have to learn in the very next two verses. But that's important for us to remember.

This past week there was a pastor's conference held here in town, and we had a man who was a representative of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Some of you will immediately notice that that is the church that was pastored by Jim Boice. Now, Jim, from our human perspective, Jim's life was tragically cut short. Short of 60 years old when he died of cancer, just a few months ago. He was a giant of the pulpit, he was a great evangelical leader, he was a faithful preacher of the word, his sermons were listened to on radio, on tape, were read in books, he was a tremendous leader and our temptation when he was taken was to ask, "Lord, why Jim, why now?" And it was interesting that everywhere they go the staff of Tenth Church is asked, "Well what's Tenth Church going to do?" And this staff member had something I thought that was very effective in His response. He said, "Well, you know, Tenth Church has always been a one-man church, and that man is Jesus Christ." And we're thankful for Jim Boice. But before Jim Boice, it was Donald Gray Barnhouse, and before Donald Gray Barnhouse, it was somebody else. And God will bring His man. But Tenth Church is a one-man church, and Jesus Christ is that man. And I think that is an important lesson to learn from this passage. It's God who's going to deliver Israel. In His grace and mercy, He chooses Moses who we are going to find in the next two verses has some of the same weaknesses that the children of Israel had. He has of the same doubts that the children of Israel had. But God is going to use him anyway. But it's God who's bringing His people out.

IV. Moses' objection to God's plan.

Finally, verses 11 and 12. Here we see Moses objection to God's plan in this astounding rejoinder of God. We learn in this passage that God will deliver His people to worship. Moses objection may look humble at first. Lord, who am I? Who am I? Who am I to do this great thing. But in fact, it actually manifests a lack of faith. That is the same thing that Israel is going to struggle with. We're not so

sure that this is best idea here. Couldn't we go back to the land, they'll say over and over in the wilderness. And God's answer to Moses' objection is stunning. He says to him that it is He who will do the work of bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt. And the sign that He has done the work will be when Israel worships Him at the mountain. In other words, He's saying "Moses, here is the sign to you that it is I who will bring the children out of Egypt. You will come to this mountain, and you will worship Me. When you get to this mountain Moses, they're not going to be worshipping you. You're going to worship Me when you come to this mountain."

It's very important that you understand that Exodus, chapter 3, verse 12 makes it crystal clear that the redemption of Israel out of Egypt is in order that they may become worshipers of God. It is the same with us. We are saved to worship. Exodus 3 makes it clear, and by the way it's not just Exodus 3:12, it's Exodus 3:18 and Exodus 4:23 and Exodus 5:1 and Exodus 5:3, and we'll see more later in the book. These passages make it clear that God's people are redeemed in order that they might worship Him. God sends Moses to Egypt to deliver His people that they might come out and worship Him. Don't underestimate the appeal of that repeated language. I want to confess something to you. Until I had to write a series of articles on the book of Exodus for *Table Talk Magazine*, if you had asked me what was Moses doing when he kept telling Pharaoh that the children of Israel had to go out of Egypt in order to worship at Sinai, what was he telling, why did he tell them that, I would have told you, well, he was tricking Pharaoh. He was making up some story in order to get Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go. I was wrong. The whole point of God bringing Israel out of Egypt was so that they would worship Him. It's the same thing in our redemption. God redeems us that we might become worshipers. Let's pray.

Lord, God, by Your spirit make us worshipers in spirit and in truth. We ask it in Jesus name, Amen.

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