

Burning Bush

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[0 : 00] So we continue our series this morning on the great stories of the Bible. We have children's storybook Bibles, and in the storybook Bibles, typically they recount the most popular, the great stories of the Bible.

And the logic for this comes from Deuteronomy chapter 6, where God says, tell your children, tell your children the great things that I have done and teach them the commandments we do this in the modern world at bedtime when we read to our kids, if you have kids, the things that God has done. But what we're doing in this series is giving an adult's look at the theology of the great stories, the kind of stories that make it into the storybooks.

And the burning bush, as you know, if you've grown up in the church, is a great story. It's a great story because for 2,000 years, Christians, and especially Christian theologians, have gone to Exodus 3 to answer what is perhaps the greatest question of existence, and that is, who is God? And this has really been the passage that people in the Old Testament have always gone to, to answer that question, who is God? It's this passage that really answers it in the whole Old Testament.

[1 : 15] And what that means is that this passage is for people, if you this morning are a seeker, if you are one of the many in our city that are on the spiritual hunt, that you know that there's something more to existence than the material world, but you haven't found it yet.

This passage is for you, because that's exactly where Moses was in this passage. And it's also for you, if you're a Christian, if you're a believer, and you're bored with Christianity, you have a really tough time wanting to know God, because this is the question, who is God?

It's the question, it brings you back. And if you're hungry, if you're a hungry Christian, if you're growing, if you've been eating up the Bible and learning more and more and coming to the knowledge of God and Christ more and more, this passage is for you, because it asks the question, who is God?

And you could never ask that question enough. And so that means this passage is for everybody. Whether you're a believer or unbeliever, coming and seeking, or you've found something, this passage is talking to you.

And so to answer the question, who is God, we're just going to look at two things about God from the passage. First, Exodus 3 tells us about the God who finds.

[2 : 32] And secondly, Exodus 3 tells us about the God who reveals. And so first, the God who finds. In verse 1, Moses, he's doing his thing.

He's doing his thing. He's a shepherd. And he's out shepherding his flock just outside west of Midian. And this is his day job. He does this every day.

He shepherds the flock. He takes them out in the wilderness and feeds them and gives them water and brings them home again. And he's doing his thing, and all of a sudden he's encountered by a bush that the text says, he sees up on Mount Horib, which is on fire, but it's not being burned up. It's not literally being consumed. It's not being burnt into pieces. Literally it says that it's not exactly maybe not a bush, but a thicket, or literally thorns, brambles, kind of a picture.

So it might even be pretty big. But this is his day job. He's not out pursuing God. He's not out looking for God. He's shepherding his flock.

[3 : 37] And it says in verse 3 that he's forced to turn aside, to see something great, to go up the mountain Mount Horib. By the way, Mount Horib, the most, the more popular name for it is Sinai.

This is Mount Sinai, the place that he will return to after the Exodus. And so Moses is a shepherd. He was a prince of Egypt as DreamWorks reminded us so well in 1998.

He was a prince of Egypt. He's a shepherd now because he ran away from Egypt. He had murdered an Egyptian slaver who was beating an Israelite.

And the reason he did this is because he knew that he was also an Israelite. Moses was born an Israelite. And from an early age, he entered into Pharaoh's household as a prince.

So he was an Israelite by birth. He knew that. But by culture, he was Egyptian. And there's every indication in Exodus so far that Moses was an Egyptian.

[4 : 44] He was an Israelite ethnically, but he was Egyptian by culture. And this is clear in the previous chapter in chapter two, after Moses kills that Egyptian slaver, he runs away to Midian to the wilderness and he comes upon a well.

And there are women there trying to feed their flocks. And these male shepherds come in and attack them and force them away from the well so they can't get water. And Moses comes in and he saves them.

He fights for them. Maybe he beats up the guys. I don't know. But he fights for them and he gets the women their water. And they go back to their father, Jethro, and they say, we were saved by an Egyptian.

So they think he's an Egyptian. He looks like an Egyptian. He dresses like an Egyptian, probably. He talks like an Egyptian. He uses the cool slang words that are happening in Egypt at the time. He's an Egyptian by culture.

He grew up in Pharaoh's palace. And that means so far in the book of Exodus, every indication tells us that Moses is by definition a pagan at this point.

[5 : 52] A pagan, meaning he doesn't worship strictly the God of Israel. Every indication in the passage so far tells us that he's probably a pagan.

He marries one of the girls whom he saved at the well. And her name is Zipporah. She's the daughter of Jethro. And it says in our passage in the first verse, Jethro is the priest of Midian. And when it says that he's the priest of Midian, it's not saying that he's the priest of Israel's God in Midian. He's not the priest of the biblical God in Midian. He's the priest of a Midianite religion. And we know pretty well now from different ancient Near Eastern sources that in Midian, they worshiped a God called Baal-Payor, which just means God of Payor.

And they worshiped Ashtaroth, the Queen of Heaven. And so he marries into a family that's polytheistic. He marries into a family that worships many gods.

[6 : 50] And he fits right in. He's part of them. He's the son-in-law of the priest of Midian. And that means that Moses was a polytheist. He was a pagan.

Up to this point in the Bible, he knows about Israel's God. He knows about the stories, probably. But he's a pagan. He had settled into rural life.

He settled into a foreign land. And he was living amongst a polytheistic culture. And what that means is that this is Moses' conversion story.

This is Moses' conversion story. Moses was a man on the search. He was a man seeking and looking for something, looking for truth.

And he always had been. And he was out doing his day job shepherding at this passage when he's confronted by something great, by great sites.

[7 : 49] He had always been attracted by justice. He's willing to go fight for the Israelite slave in the face of a slaver. He's willing to go save the women at the well.

But even more than that, when he has his first son, Zipporah, he names his son, Gershom, which means I'm a sojourner.

I'm a seeker. I'm searching for something that I haven't yet found. And he was in a conflicted state. He was ethnically Israelite, culturally Egyptian and polytheistic.

And he was searching for truth. And he hadn't found it. He was a sojourner. And seeking, being on the spiritual hunt, it's incredibly common in our city, in a city like Edinburgh.

If you go out and talk to people in the streets in Edinburgh, you'll probably not find as many people who are atheistic as you would expect. What you'll find in the 21st century is that more than not, people are on the spiritual hunt.

[8 : 52] They're spiritualists in some general sense. They know that there's something more to existence than just the material world, but they haven't quite found exactly what that might be.

There was an old narrative that really started in the 1900s called the secularist story or theory. And it started with Karl Marx, perhaps when Karl Marx, the guy who founded Marxism, said that religion

is just an opiate to the masses.

It's an opiate. It's a drug to people who don't have knowledge, who don't have technology, who need something to get them through the day in a life that's misery and a life that's suffering. And a lot of people really picked up on that narrative in the 20th century, especially in the academy. Scholars would constantly talk about how religion, by the end of the 20th century, would almost be completely wiped out. That religion would slowly but surely die out as technology improved, as the hospitals got better, as life extended, and you didn't need an opiate, some sense of an otherworldly God to help you get through your day to day life.

Today, four-fifths of all people on earth believe in the supernatural. 80 percent. And that number just really hasn't changed much in a century.

[10:06] 80 percent, four out of every five people on the entire planet, believe in the supernatural. I mean, there's a good reason for that. Materialism is really hard to square with our basic human experience.

Materialism being that there is no supernatural world, there is no spiritual world. Everything is just matter in motion. What you see is what you get. But it's really hard to square materialism with some of our most basic experiences.

The fact that we fall in love, the fact that love exists, the fact that we long and need hope, that we want so badly for there to be life after death, that we know that there is a justice out there, that law exists before us and outside of us, that all cultures recognize some of the same laws universally, that we want meaning, that there must be purpose, that every human being desires that, these are called metaphysical realities.

They're truths that exist above and beyond the material world, and we all have some kind of sense of them. Even when we feel guilty, there's a metaphysical reality that can't be explained by the sheer material.

And for that reason, 80 percent of the people on earth that exist today think it's reasonable to conclude that there is a supernatural, that the spiritual exists.

[11:24] And so that means it's incredibly normal and even popular to be a spiritual person in the 21st century. It's incredibly normal, it's incredibly popular.

But to be a spiritual person in the 21st century typically almost always now means you're always on the search for something, for something supernatural, but you're never actually allowed to find anything.

And that's the condition of what it means to be spiritual in the 21st century. You know that there's something else that exists, you know it's out there, but you're never actually allowed in our culture to find it, to actually say, there's the truth.

There's the God I was looking for. And for that reason, being spiritual in general fits really well with most religions, because most religions simply ask this, they ask a lowest common denominator, the same thing that being spiritual asks for.

And that's that you try to be a good person, that you try to be a decent citizen, do your duty, generally be a good person, that you try to stay humble, that you never arrive, that you always know there's something more to life, but you're never quite sure what it is.

[12:40] And that's the lowest common denominator of all religions really, that have ever existed, is ultimately trying to be a good person. History, the burning bush, is the explanation of why Christianity is not like modern spirituality and why it's completely different than all the other religions that have ever existed in all of history.

Being spiritual says this, human beings are on the hunt to reach up to the divine and hope beyond hope by being a good person. Someday you might find it, someday if you're good enough you might get there.

And Christianity says the exact opposite, it says that the only hope in the world for human beings and for the entire cosmos is not that you reach up and get God, but that God comes down and finds you.

That God condescends, that God comes and forces you to turn aside from your day to day job from your local shepherding duties and to walk up the mountain and see something great.

And that means that the only way a human being can know God according to the Bible, according to the biblical religion, is that God come down, that God come find you.

[13:58] And the Bible tells the story that despite human sin, despite human rebellion, despite humans rejecting the God who created, there is a God who comes down and says, I want you, I've

come to find you.

And so the question is how? And that really dives us into the depths of the burning bush story. So secondly, how does God come find us? And the answer is because God, the biblical God is the God who comes and reveals himself.

And in this passage, God reveals himself in two ways, and the first way is the way of the great conundrum. So if you look down at verse four, Moses turns aside to go up the mountain, and when the Lord sees him, it says that God calls out to Moses out of the bush and says, Moses, Moses. Now God repeats Moses' name, and in Hebrew, the language that exists behind this English translation, repeating something more than once is really important in that language.

It's emphatic. And what that means is when he says Moses' name twice, the sense of it is that it's incredibly endearing. It's a father talking to a child. It's Moses.

[15:17] Moses, I want you. I love you. I've come for you. Insert your name here. I want you. I love you.

I've come for you. And then in verse five, but don't come near me. You see it in verse five. Then as soon as he says Moses, Moses, I want you.

And then the very next verse, but don't come near me. Stay back. Don't get any closer. I will kill you if you come any closer.

So this is the great conundrum. God says, insert your name here. Moses, Moses, I want you. I've come for you. Come to me. And then as soon as Moses starts to approach, he said, stop right there.

Don't get any closer. Don't come near me. You cannot touch me. You cannot dwell with me. You cannot be here in this sacred space. Take off your shoes.

[16:17] You know where you are. And look, the text tells us exactly what this means in verse five. Don't come near. Take off your sandals. The place on which you are standing is holy.

The reason God comes down to find Moses, he wants Moses, he yearns for Moses. And then he says, don't come any closer. The text says it. It's because God is holy.

And what that means, God is saying is, I'm better than you. I'm better than you. In other words, God is saying, look, I define reality.

You've been coming. You've been searching this life on your terms, worshiping God after God, running away from justice. I'm coming to you. I'm defining reality.

What this means, God is fiery. He can't be controlled. He won't be controlled. And what he's calling Moses to do is to take off his sandals and face reality that God defines who God is.

[17:19] And what this means is that our feelings, our hearts, what we want God to be like, isn't the definition of who God is.

That human beings' hearts cannot define God. No matter how much a human being wants God to be a certain way, you can't fit him into your frame. He's fiery. He's down in a burning bush, and he says, don't come any closer.

I'm holy. You are not perfect, and you know in your conscience that you ought to be. And so he says, come, come, Moses, but stop.

Don't get any closer. Take off your sandals. Give up your idols, in other words. And so the question, sorry, let me say this, John, the apostle puts it this way in 1 John chapter 3.

He says, God is greater than your heart. God is greater than your heart. What would God be like if God was exactly like what your heart desired of him?

[18:20] That wouldn't be a God. It wouldn't be a God if you could frame him in exactly the way you wanted to be. But God is greater than your heart. And so the question that's being presented to Moses in this moment, come to me, but don't get any closer, is are you willing to surrender to reality?

Are you willing to surrender? Are you willing to acknowledge the God who is, not the God that you want God to be? Are you willing to take off your sandals, to remove your idols, to remove your false conceptions of God?

And so the second way that God reveals himself in this passage is specifically through a burning bush. Moses sees a bush on fire, and God speaks to him out of that bush, and it did not burn up. It was not consumed. But no storybook, if you flip to Exodus 3, the story of the burning bush in any of the storybooks, no storybook really captures exactly what's happening here.

The Free Church of Scotland, the denomination that St. Columbus is part of, has as its emblem the burning bush, and Edinburgh Theological Seminary across the street also has as its emblem the burning bush, which is good, all good and well.

[19 : 37] But the emblem of the burning bush actually doesn't get at what's happening in this passage. The point is that Moses doesn't exactly see just a burning bush.

What is it? What's the purpose, the point here? What is it that Moses sees exactly? And if you look down at verse 2, you'll see it. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush.

The angel of the Lord appeared to him. And then, well, in other words, the thing that Moses sees is not simply a bush that's on fire.

Moses had seen many bushes that were on fire. He lived in the desert. In verse 6, it says that when he approaches it, he hides his face, afraid.

Now, people who live in Midian, they don't hide their faces from bushes that are on fire. It's just not what you do. You light bushes on fire all the time if you live in where he lived.

[20 : 38] Why did he hide his face? Why was he afraid? And it's not because of the bush. It's because of what he saw in the bush, coming out of the bush. Now what he saw emerging from the bush was an embodied human likeness.

Did you catch that in verse 2? He saw the angel of the Lord coming out of the midst of the bush, clothed in a flame of fire. He sees a likeness.

He sees an image of something that looks like a human being coming out of the bush. Now who is this? What is this? This angel of the Lord that he sees, the angel of the Lord.

The text doesn't say it's an angel of the Lord, but the angel of the Lord. The definite article, the angel of the Lord. And that's really important. The angel of the Lord makes an appearance a few times in the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis to Deuteronomy.

In Genesis 22, the angel of the Lord comes to Hagar. And when the angel of the Lord comes, Hagar worships the angel.

[21 : 46] And then Hagar later says, God came and spoke to me. And just before that, in Genesis 18, three men appear to Abraham.

And one of them, it says, is the angel of the Lord. And Moses in that passage bows down and worships at the feet of the angel of the Lord, who looks like a human being.

And even more than that, in Exodus 23, God talks about the angel of the Lord. He says, look, I'm going to send my angel before you to guard you, the people of Israel, on the way to bring you to the place I have prepared.

Be attentive to the angel. Listen to his voice. Do not rebel against him because he will not forgive your transgressions for my name is in him. But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.

Who's the angel of the Lord? And what Exodus 23 says is the angel of the Lord has the power to forgive sins or to condemn transgressions.

[22 : 52] That the angel of the Lord, it says, bears the name of God, or literally is the name of God. Now the name.

If you live in the Old Testament times, if you live in the Ancient Near East and you have a name, it means something pretty different from what it means for us today in the modern world. My name's Cory. I've said that already.

My name's Cory. And look, it could be different. My name could be something different very easily. My parents could have done something. I could have changed it anytime.

And there's a decent chance that even with a different name, I could still be exactly who I am today. To a large degree, I could be here working here and doing a PhD and teaching at this church and all this stuff.

If you're a male in this room today, your name is either Colin, Don, or Neil. And there's no doubt about that. And look, if your name is Don and you play the piano, it could have been Colin or Neil, nothing else but one of those two.

[24 : 00] And it could have been different. It wouldn't have mattered. In the modern world, your name does not have a direct bearing on exactly who you are and what you do in life.

Not so for the ancient Near East. Abraham was called Abraham by God-wide because his name means Father of Nations. When you name somebody, you name them according to their vocation,

their identity, who they are.

Abraham is called Abraham because he is the Father of Nations. And that's exactly what his name means. And it's the same thing for God. And so when God says his name, when God says the angel of the Lord bears my name, what he's saying is my name is equal to my identity, my nature. My name is exactly who I am. He's telling us exactly what his nature is like when he says his name. And in Exodus 23, he says that the angel of the Lord, this angel that's coming out of the midst of this fiery bush, is his name.

And the beautiful thing is we can know exactly what that means because in Exodus 314, the greatest passage in all the Bible perhaps that declares who God is, God tells us exactly what his name is.

[25 : 15] Exodus 314, Moses comes and says, God, what am I going to go tell the people when I say I'm representing you to them? And God says, I am who I am.

That's my name. Or in the very next line, I am is my name. And what does that mean? And theologians have taken this just very, we're almost done very briefly in two ways historically. First, this is the translation of God's name Yahweh. Yahweh, it's a verb in Hebrew. It means I am or I will be who I will be.

I am who I am. And what God is saying, we take it, he's saying, as first, he's saying to Moses, I am absolute being. I am existence.

I am bigger than you. You are a relative being. You are contingent. You're not necessary. You come and you go. You live and you die. Just like every single one of us, you change.

[26 : 16] You are a person that's in becoming, people often say. You're always changing. You have potential. God doesn't have potential. God doesn't change. He is, and that's why he calls himself the I am.

I am absolute being, completely qualitatively different from us who are relative beings. But the second way that people have often taken this in the context, the passage, is what he is saying here is, I've promised your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and I'm coming to tell you I'm rescuing you and your people.

And I am what I am. I will be what I will be. What I say is what I do. I'm not capricious like the gods of Egypt, the gods of Midian that you've been worshipping. I do what I say.

I'm consistent. I will rescue you because I promised it. I am what I am. This is my name, Yahweh. I am, that is God's name, the name of God that has been revealed to us, Yahweh.

And in this passage, it says that the angel of the Lord, in Exodus 23, bears the name Yahweh.

[27 : 28] And what that means is that what we have here, the angel coming out of the burning bush is a pre-incarnate incarnation of God.

Meaning, this is God, calm down, condescended in human form in a human likeness called the angel of the Lord. And every time that the angel of the Lord comes down in human likeness in the Old Testament, he comes as the mediator.

And in Genesis 22, we looked at it a couple of weeks ago, there was a mediator in that passage as Moses began to sacrifice his son, Isaac. There was a mediator, a lamb, in the midst of a thicket, in the midst of literally, it says, a bush.

And now we have another mediator in another bush coming out of the flame of the fire. How does God solve the great conundrum?

How does God solve the great conundrum? Is God's justice and God's love? He says, I love you, I want you, I don't care what you've done, come to me.

[28 : 32] Moses, Moses, Colin, Colin, Don, Don, Neil, Neil, whatever your name is, come to me, I want you. If you're a seeker, if you're on the spiritual search, he comes down, unlike all the other religions, God comes down and says, I don't care what you've done, I want you.

And don't get any closer because I'm just and I'm holy, and that's the great conundrum. And how do you solve it? How do you solve the great conundrum?

And the answer is the mediator, the angel of the Lord, come in the fire. 1200 years later, 1200 years later, there are two episodes in the Gospels, John chapter eight, John chapter 18.

And the first, Jesus Christ is talking to the scribes and they say to him, do you have a demon? And he says, no, I don't have a demon. False. And then they say, well, are you a prophet?

How do you do the things you do? And he says, Abraham wished that he could see the day that I come, that I would come. And they said, whoa, that sounds like blasphemy to me.

[29 : 36] Are you saying that you're greater than Abraham? And Jesus says, before Abraham was, I am literally before Abraham was Yahweh.

I am the angel. I'm the angel of the Lord. I am Yahweh. I bear the name. Then chapters later in John chapter 18, he's standing in the garden of Gethsemane about to go to the cross and the soldiers come for him.

And they come to arrest him and he says, who is it that you're searching for? And they say, Jesus of Nazareth. And what does he say? He says, I am Yahweh.

And we know that he's not just identifying himself. Yeah, I'm Jesus. I'm the one you're looking for because the soldiers fall back, if you remember in that passage, and they fall on their faces. The soldiers who've come to arrest him and he's given himself up and they fall back and fall on their faces because he says the divine name.

He says, I am. Who is it that's standing in the midst of the fire coming out of the burning bush, the mediator that Moses sees? It's the Son of God. It's pre-incarnate incarnation.

[30 : 47] It's who we will one day call Jesus Christ, God become man. And he had to come in the fire. In this passage, he comes into the fire that's inapproachable, a fire that he cannot be touched by.

But 1200 years later, he's going to come just past the Garden of Gethsemane and step into the fire. He's going to come and step into the fire so that we could approach the fire that never goes out, the fire that's always burning but never consumes.

Jesus Christ came just like he did 1200 years before in the fire, but this time it was in the fires of judgment. And that's why the cross is the answer to the great conundrum.

What do you do about God's justice in the face of God's love? God killed himself so that when he said, Moses, Moses, Colin, Colin, insert your name here, you could come to him no matter what you've done and he could call you son or daughter.

The answer to the great conundrum is the cross. And so let me just say, and we'll close, what do you have to do?

[31 : 51] Christianity is like no other religion because of that. God became man, God came to find us. What do you have to do? Just real quick, you have to turn aside like Moses did from your day job.

When you see something great, you've got to walk up the mountain and go take hold of it, find it. In other words, sometimes our busyness gets in the way of perceiving reality that this world exists from God, for God, through God, and to God.

One pastor in New York, Tim Keller, puts it this way, what if Moses would have said, that's really interesting, but I got to get the sheep home by eight o'clock tonight, so I got to go.

You have to turn aside and go see the God who has found you. He has come in Jesus Christ. He has pronounced, I want you in Christ.

And so to turn aside means, secondly, in the New Testament, it's a similar word, repent, to turn, to turn off the path you've been on, to turn from idols, and to come to face the real God, the God that is greater than your heart.

[33 : 07] Take off your shoes, your idols, and reimagine the purpose of your life, standing on the sacred ground of the gospel. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this word, we thank you for the God who reveals himself.

That's you, primarily, finally in Christ Jesus. Help us to believe and hope. In Jesus' name, amen.