

The Burning Bush

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to look at Exodus chapter 3 tonight and the story of the burning bush Exodus 3. I'll read in just a moment from 1 to 15. This is a great story. Right. One of the great stories of scripture and could be called the most pivotal moment of the Old Testament in many ways.

It's so great that for 20 centuries now, 21 centuries now, Christian Christian thinkers, Christians and Christian theologians have come to this passage because this is where in the Old Testament we get the answer to what may be the most pivotal question of existence.

And that's who is God. And it's right here in Exodus chapter 3 and it's really the first moment of the Old Testament and the Torah here in the first five books that God answers that question clearly.

And what we'll see I think tonight for just a few minutes and we won't spend too much time. But if you are a person maybe who is wrestling with staleness in your heart in regard to the gospel and in regard to the claims of Jesus Christ, maybe you've believed the gospel for decades, but because of being out of the church in an embodied state and all sorts of things that might have crept in in life that we go through seasons of staleness towards Jesus.

Or if you are a person who's here tonight, who's been visiting or around for a while and is seeking after an answer that you've yet to find a truth that you have yet to grasp hold of where the, you know, the beauty of creation or the impingement of the moral order on your conscience has pricked you off where you're looking for a bigger answer than what the world around you has had to offer over the years. This is a passage that's definitively for you, because that's precisely where Moses was in this story.

[2 : 0 5] And at the same time, if you're a Christian who's been walking with the Lord for decades and decades and growing and growing, you know, you don't you don't ever graduate from the question who is God. And the answer to that is.

The unity and Trinity and Trinity and unity is our call as we as we grow and so really this passage is just for everybody. So let's let me pray and then we will we'll read it together Exodus 3 1 to 15. Let's pray. Our Lord we give thanks for scripture and we ask now that the Holy Spirit would bless this reading of your word we pray this in Christ name.

So this is Exodus 3 1 to 15. Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father in law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and he came to horror the mountain of God, and the angel of the Lord appeared to him and a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and he looked at the place and behold the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great site. Why the bush is not burned. And when the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see God called to him and out of the bush, Moses, Moses, and he said, I am, then he said, do not come near take your sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. And he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God. And God said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and I've heard their cry, because of their taskmasters, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and a land flowing with milk and honey to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Parasites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. And now behold the cry of the people of Israel has come to me. And I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Come, I will send you Pharaoh that you may bring my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt.

[4 : 25] And he said, but I will be with you and this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. Then Moses said to God, if I come to the people of Israel and I say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you.

And they asked me, what is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. And he said, say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you. God also said to Moses, say this to the people 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 thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations, go and gather the elders of Israel together. This is God's holy word.

So the question that overrides this text, the question of the text that's presented directly in the text is who is God. And so we'll see two things briefly. First, we learn here that God is the God who comes to find. And then secondly, he is the God who then reveals himself. So first, God is the God who comes to find.

You look down at verse one and Moses is doing his day job. He is a shepherd here. He's doing his day to day tasks. And he looks up, it says, and he is encountered. The text presents that as he is encountered, he is passive. It's literally in Hebrew, a thicket on fire that presents itself to him. And he gets interrupted.

[5 : 57] You know, one of the things to notice is that he is he is not pursuing God. He is not looking for a temple. He is not trying to find the Lord in any way in this passage.

Verse three says that he had to, quote, turn aside to see something great. He had to change direction to go see what God had encountered him with.

And it says that he goes up to Mount Horib. It's called here, which is also known in Exodus, oftentimes as the mountain of God, which will later be called in Exodus 19, Mount Sinai.

So this is Mount Sinai here where God first appears to Moses. And, you know, we know if you know the Exodus story, Moses was not always a shepherd.

He has dream works pictures reminded us in 1998. He used to be a prince of Egypt, right? And he is not a prince of Egypt anymore because he murdered an Egyptian slave.

[6 : 59] Remember, he had a he had a strong sense of justice for his biological people, even though he had always been separated from birth from his biological people. But so he murders an Egyptian slave or over Israelite cruelty, overcruelty to the Israelites, and he has to run away.

He is now an enemy of the Egyptian state. And when he gets to Midian, this territory that he's in, he's in, he encounters a well in chapter two verse 16 and these Midianite women are being attacked by some shepherds in the area and Moses fights for them.

He saves them and he runs off these Midianite shepherds and these women go back to their father, the chapter before this, and they say, today we were rescued by an Egyptian.

And so that means that when they saw Moses who had run away from Egypt, they saw an Egyptian. He, he dressed like an Egyptian, he talked like an Egyptian, walked like an Egyptian.

And he, he was an, see, Moses was, remember, biologically of Israel, but culturally, and in every way, he was, he was Egyptian.

[8 : 17] And he would have grown up, he grew up in Pharaoh's household, he grew up with an Egyptian mother, and he would have grown up being taken to the, to the temple of Rah, who was the primary God over Egypt at the time, the God of the Son and worshipping.

Moses, it's so critical to remember that Moses is a polytheist at this point. When we, when we see Moses in Exodus chapter three, he is a pagan by definition, he worships the gods, he was raised as a pagan and as a polytheist.

And you see that even clearly, he marries Zipporah, one of the women that he saved from the well that day. And when he marries Zipporah, Zipporah is named after ancient Near Eastern goddess.

And he marries into a family where, where Jethro is quote, the priest of Midian. And that does not mean that he was the priest of the real God in Midian.

Jethro is a polytheistic priest. And we know that because later on in the, in the first five books of the Bible, Jethro comes to faith in the true God and the God of Israel.

[9 : 27] And Moses names his son, Gershom, which means in Hebrew, I am a seeker, I am a sojourner. In other words, he's saying, I have not found home.

You know, I was born biologically of Israel, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I was raised as an Egyptian polytheist and pagan, and I've run away from both those groups and I'm living in this land of Midian, married into, he will be married into a Midianite family.

I have not found, I have not found my home. I've not found what I was looking for. I mean, you even see this when he says it's important in the context to see this that when he says to God, when I go back to Israel and I say the God of Israel has sent me.

And they ask, well, what is his name? You know, the reason he is asking that is because he does not know what to call the true God of Israel.

He's a pagan, he's a polytheist, he doesn't know. He doesn't know this God. He's heard of this God, but he does not know this God. And what that means, what that means is that what we're reading about in Exodus, Exodus chapter three to put it in New Testament terms.

[10 : 41] This is Moses's conversion story. This is, this is when Moses is being called out of darkness and into light and he was a man on search, on the search, a shepherd in the wilderness that had not found what he had been looking for his whole life.

And today, in the 21st century in Edinburgh and in places like New York and London and Chicago and Los Angeles and even Jackson, Mississippi, more and more.

What we're seeing is that one of the hallmarks of what it means to be a Western person in the 21st century is to be a person who is on the search for for the spiritual reality.

You know, it is, it is absolutely acceptable in the 21st century in a place like Edinburgh and other major cities to be spiritual, to be spiritual in a general way to be religious to be hoping for something more to be to be looking for something more.

Part of that is because in the 19th century, Karl Marx had posited what came to be called the old secularism thesis. The old secularism thesis is comes out of Marx Karl Marx very famous statement that religion is nothing but the opiate of the masses and you know Marx idea was that when you know when we can flush toilets and when ambulances will come pick you up from your house if you need them.

[12 : 13] And when there are hospitals and doctors and suffering starts to get mitigated, because the 19th century was still a century of a lot of suffering, medically speaking, then religion will die out religion is nothing but a drug for sufferers Marx thought.

And so the secularism thesis was that as technology advances religion diminishes. And what the Scott the sociologist and the philosophers today know is that Marx was absolutely wrong.

That that never happened that in the 2010 World Council of Churches census for example, that 83% they found of the entire world remained theist remained believers in the supernatural, even even after the push of militant atheism in the in the early 21st century most of the world still believes in God and that's because secular materialistic humanism cannot do justice to the invisible realities of our life that we all hold on to love and morality and justice and law and hope and meaning and purpose.

A mere materialistic humanism of the modern city cannot make sense of it and so most people still remain religious however, however, it is very normal today to be spiritual and to believe in God in some sense, that is very acceptable what is not okay.

The rule of public discourse and the modern West that we live in is that while you can be spiritual it's not okay to be exclusive and to say I have actually found the truth that I was looking for.

[13 : 54] I've actually come to say this is the God who is the God above all gods. It's okay to be generally spiritual, and which is the call to be a generally good citizen and hope beyond hope that your goodness will get you through to something more when you die, but it is not okay to say to say this is the truth this is the God above all gods what Exodus is that the truth that he comes in and teaches us actually is is why Christianity is not like modern spirituality and why Christianity is not like the world religions of history, because in this passage what we see while Moses is spiritual.

He believes in a God he believes in many gods he believes in some truth that he has yet to find just like the modern spiritual person. What this passage teaches like the rest of the Bible is that the only hope in all of history is not that you seek and somehow stumble upon some truth is that God comes down from heaven and finds you that God comes and interrupts your day job that God comes while you're in the midst of your shepherding duties and sets you on fire and blows your heart up and rebuilds you from the inside out Christianity's fundamental distinction from all the other religions is that you can never find God you can never seek after God enough you can never be religious enough.

What we need is a God who would condescend and come and find us who would come and interrupt our day to day life, who would come into the midst of our busyness and show us the only way and you know I said at the beginning, this is a passage for those of us like me who have been in the church for decade upon decade and because of COVID and because of being disembodied in relation to the people of God and because at the same time your lives are busy yet without as much structure as normal.

We can so easily move away from scripture and from being in communion with God weekend and week out and our hearts become stale and they become hard and this passage comes in and says we need the God who comes and finds us who comes and shakes us up who comes and calls to us in verse three and says, turn aside from your busyness, turn aside from the staleness of the heart and see something great again, the God of the gospel who has come to rescue you because you never were going to find him.

And so that's the first the we see here a God who comes down the God of Christianity the God of the Bible is the God who comes to find us because we could never get him in our search.

[16 : 47] But but secondly and finally this passage also then goes on because this is also the God who reveals himself reveals his identity and there's two ways that he does that in this passage.

A lot of people in the past, I'm certainly not the first to notice this have come to this passage to talk about the great conundrum of the Bible. And it's right here in the midst of the passage you can see it in verse four some people have called it the great paradox of scripture.

And in verse four, God calls Moses up the mountain to see this ticket that is burning. And when he gets there, he says in verse four, Moses, Moses, he says his name twice.

And you know in saying that he's saying in the Hebrew text this is written and the grammarians will tell us that in Hebrew they don't have a superlative case you know we have good better best we say in English or whatever I mean you can make a superlative of all sorts of things he is he is the most the most best I have no idea if that's correct but things like that those are superlatives.

That's not they don't have that in Hebrew so what happens instead is that words get repeated multiple times. For instance Isaiah chapter six you have holy, holy, holy.

[18 : 10] And if you were saying it in and if it was if the Bible was in English originally it wouldn't say that it just say, he's the holiest, you know that that's what it's doing it's the superlative. And here you have Moses, Moses, and it's got double emphatic note of endearment where God is father, coming to a man that he loves that is lost and saying, I want you.

I love you. I want you to come to me. I want to be with you. I God who created everything want to be in presence with you Moses who murdered a man and is wandering lost, worshipping all these gods I love you.

But that, you know, the great conundrum then is right after that. Do you see what he says he turns and says, do not come near me. He says, I want you I love you and stop right there don't get any closer. Because this, this is holy temple domain.

You cannot step. I want you I love you come near me and do not get close to me at the very same time. And this is the great paradox of history. This is the great paradox and conundrum of the whole Bible.

This is the problem of the Old Testament that God loves that God is a God of love. And he wants you he wants humanity. He desires that non parish he wants to come to you.

[19 : 37] And at the same time when you get near when he gets near to you he says stay back. Stay back. And it's of course because he is holy. He loves you. And he is holy and he's just he is absolute and being and cannot be known lest he condescend and come to us yet perfect and righteousness he cannot be approached, apart from a perfect life on our part and so you know why does there exist this modern spirituality in the demise of the old Christian world. It's because everybody knows that they want to be in the presence of God. We're born that way everybody knows that they ought to be perfect.

And they're not the conscience speaks into our hearts and we spirituality exists because we are religious by nature. We want God and yet God is holy and cannot be approached by the guilty conscience and not only is it saying that but I think it's also saying that it's so important for us today.

For our world today our culture and that is that when God comes down to the earth he sets the terms. You know, he tells you how you're going to approach him. He tells you how to worship them he.

In other words, our feelings cannot define God or define the world that God has made our feelings go on don't get to determine even how we approach God he comes down and tells us how to feel he comes down comes down and tell tells us how to approach you know.

John gets at this and first John chapter three, when John says God is greater than your heart he God is greater than anything we feel about God or the world he defines the world he defines reality he sets the standards.

[21 : 20] Mr beaver reminded us of this very famously in Narnia remember Mr beaver said as land he is good but he is not safe. He is fine he says he comes in all goodness and says come to me I want you, and then do not get near he is not safe for us, because he is absolute justice, and we are guilty centers.

And so when he says come come Moses Moses and your name I want you I love you, but step back he tells him you know, take off your sandals.

If you want to approach me you've got to take your sand you've got to undress you, you've got to be taken apart and put back together again, you've got to be willing. The question, are you willing Moses to put away your idols to know what is actually wrong with yourself from the inside out if you want to approach me, the perfect and the holy God the God who's come to love you come to come to find you take your shoes off and surrender.

Put your idols away and surrender to reality, as I define it, because I am the God of creation. Now, the second way God reveals himself here is he reveals himself of course through the burning bush, and this is the last thing.

Moses sees a bush, a thicket, literally it's not just one bush but probably a whole a whole mountain top of bramble and thicket on fire, and it's not being consumed right and the important thing however here is to notice precisely what he sees because when he gets to the top of the mountain. It is not only a bush on fire. I know this this is one of the emblems actually of the free church of Scotland I think or at least of ETS is the is the tree the bush emblazoned and the important thing add to that though is to notice exactly what happened in this passage if you down you notice that it is not just that he saw a thicket or a bush on fire, but it says out of the bush, he saw the angel of the Lord. And it talks about how afraid he is multiple times in the passage and look it's not just saying that he hides his face and he's afraid because there was a bush on fire.

[23 : 55] He hides himself and is afraid because from out of the bush, the angel of the Lord approached him. He saw something that he didn't expect in any way the angel of the Lord steps out of the midst of the bush in some manner and form of embodiment.

And that is the critical vision that he sees here and we've already seen the angel of the Lord in Genesis 22. The angel came to Hagar, and when the angel of the Lord, not an angel, but the definite article the angel of the Lord comes to Hagar.

She says, God spoke to me. And in Genesis 18, three different men appear to Abraham, and the middle one was the angel of the Lord and what does Abraham do? He bows down before the man in the middle, the angel of the Lord and breaks bread and gives him wine to drink.

And here, the third time in the Bible, the angel of the Lord appears, you know, when Moses is talking to God, when God is saying, let me tell you my name, who is it that's speaking?

It's not this voice coming through thunder clouds. It's not like the Prince of Egypt Dreamworks pictures 1998 imagined it. No, it is the angel of the Lord whose voice is coming forth and identifying the name of God.

[25 : 21] And you get this actually a little bit later. And Exodus 23, it's a really important passage about the angel of the Lord. It says, look, God says, look, I'm about to send an angel before you to guard you on the way you're about to go to the promised land.

And be attentive to him and listen to his voice. Don't rebel against him. Why? Because he has the power to forgive and condemn sins, he says, and he bears my name.

So is the angel of the Lord, what is the angel of the Lord, the angel of the Lord bears the name of God has the power to forgive sins and speaks the name of God for the first time in all of human history in front of Moses here and you know one way to get at the answer to this I think that's helpful is just to say very quickly that the names in this world were not like names today, you know, my name could have been very different it's not that big of a deal what my parents named me.

Those are a little more important in Scotland. Oftentimes, the connections run a little bit deeper than here, but not even near as much as the ancient Near East, because in the ancient Near East, your name was both a way of identifying your essence and calling out identifying your vocation your life, you know, and so you think of Abraham, Abraham, he is the father of nations that is literally his name it's his essence it's what he is the father of nations, and also God says your name is Abraham go and be the father of nations.

So the name is both your essence and your job description, if you will. And when Moses says what what name am I supposed to give God what name am I supposed to tell the Israelites, the name of God, the angel of the Lord says my name is I am, or it can be translated I am who I am or I will be who I will be. And in that name, you've got both of those realities you've got God, God, telling his own essence saying, I am absolute being I am existence in itself you humans are contingent you didn't have to exist, but I exist necessarily, I am absolute and then at the same time, I will be what I will be I will never stop loving you. I will always be the covenantal God who has come, and who will not see I have made a promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I will see it through to the end its essence and vocation, and it is the angel of the Lord that is saying that is my name and what that means. What I would propose to you is that what we are reading about here is a pre incarnate incarnation of the Son of God in the Old Testament the Son of God, the angel of the Lord, who has come down to reveal who God is the name of God, the nature of God, he is God, he is the Son, this is the Son of God and so when you ask the question to close how do you solve the great conundrum, the great conundrum of history, the great conundrum of humanity of all of the Bible when God comes to each of us and says, I will want you. I love you.

[28 : 53] I don't desire that you perish I want to come and I want to call your name and I want to draw you to me and yet don't get any closer because I am just and holy and you were guilty. How do you solve the great conundrum the answer has always been the same.

And the answer is look to the Son of God in the midst of the fire. And it's always been that way you know it look at the angel of God come out of the fire that's the solution to the great conundrum, and it's been the solution for all of history because look 1200 years on from this moment 1250 years on from this moment.

And John chapter eight, the scribes are questioning Jesus and they say to him you know do you have a demon. And of course he says no I do not have a demon. And then they say, Are you better than the prophet Abraham do you think yourself better.

He says the incredible line before Abraham was, I am. And they tried to kill him, because he had spoken the name. And in John 18 and guess so many, they came to arrest him.

And the soldiers say where is Jesus of Nazareth and he says is it Jesus that you're seeking. And they said yeah who is Jesus and what does he say, I am, and the Roman soldiers that came to arrest him fall on their faces.

[30 : 25] And he speaks the divine name, when the angel of the Lord the son of God incarnate speaks his own identity to them they fall on the ground before him. You see, the answer has always been that the son of God who appears in the glory fire of Mount Sinai and exegesis chapter will trade that for the baptism of fire on the cross for us. The answer has always been look for the mediator the son of God come down in the midst of the fire. He traded the glory of Sinai for the humiliation of death, and he did that for us so that justice and mercy could meet so that, so that God could come to you and say your name your name but not say don't get any closer to me. So that Mary and John 20 on resurrection Sunday which will celebrate next week could come up and give him a bear hug.

And not push her away when he was resurrected from the dead in Jesus Christ, justice and mercy kiss and the great problem of all of history is diminished forever. I'll close literally with this in every other religion and every other religion this is so important for modern people to be able to get in the midst of a city like Edinburgh and every other religion, people seek the divine and hope that they could be good enough someday to achieve it.

But in Christianity God comes down to get us in radical mercy. And that is the the fundamental difference in Christianity it's it's why it preaches it's why there's so much hope that no matter how bad we are he continues to chase after us and seek after us and by the one theologian put it this way Christianity is so unique because all the other major religions have founders, but in none of them is the founder the very content.

Jesus Christ is the content of Christianity the center of all of history, and the only hope for justice satisfied and mercy delivered to us and so to that tonight for you guys this morning for me.

We have to do what Moses did we have we have to verse three, we have to turn aside to see something great again the greatness of the gospel one pastor asked the question, what if Moses would have said man I think there's a big fire going on on top of the mountain and my wife's going to be upset if I don't get the sheep home by eight o'clock you know, we've got to get away from our busyness and every single day real waking to the greatness of the gospel of God and Jesus Christ and the in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, usually don't finish a sermon by starting with a sentence that says in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that that's a immediate glaze over but this is an interest is an important point.

[33 : 29] This word in verse three, Moses turned aside to see something great appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament that Jesus would have often read from as meta noia repentance.

So the text literally says that when Moses was confronted by God. He had to repent he didn't have a choice he was. God had called him out and in today, the call of this passage to us is that today this Sunday is a day of repentance and turning back to the fact of Jesus Christ for us as we step into Monday.

Let's pray together father we ask that you would shake us up we asked that. The place that justice and mercy kiss in the center of history the gospel itself would be our hope and Lord shake up our hearts and break our boredom with Jesus we ask for those who might be seeking and exploring the claims of faith that they would see how you have written history how you have shown up over and over how you have condescended to come and find us we give thanks to you the God of the gospel and pray that the spirit would be at work in our lives in the lives of this church family and we ask for it in Jesus name.

Amen.