

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 5 of 7)

'What is in Your Hand?': The Call to Trust and Obey

Exodus 4:1-26

Mark Vroegop

¹ Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" ² The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." ³ And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. ⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵ "that they may 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." ⁶ Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. ⁷ Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. ⁸ "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. ⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground." ¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." ¹³ But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." ¹⁴ Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. ¹⁶ He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. ¹⁷ And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs." ¹⁸ Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." ¹⁹ And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." ²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. ²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" ²⁴ At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision (*Exodus 4:1-26 - ESV*).

In 1887, after an evangelistic meeting led by Dwight Moody, a young man stood to share his story in the after-service testimony meeting. As he spoke it was clear that he knew little about the Bible, but the closing line of his testimony gripped Daniel Towner, the musical director of several well-known churches and schools, including Moody Bible Institute. The young man said: "I'm not quite

sure, but I'm going to trust and I'm going to obey." Towner brought the line to John Sammis, a Presbyterian minister, who composed the lyrics that are familiar to many of us:

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.¹*

"To trust and obey" is a central element of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We have to trust – to believe that God will keep His promise. And we have to obey – to choose to submit to God's will and His ways. This is true for anyone who calls him or herself a Christian; we see it all over the New Testament, even in the life of Jesus. But we also see the importance of trusting and obeying in the Old Testament, especially in the life of Moses.

Last week, in chapter three, we learned about Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush. We were able to see how God revealed Himself to Moses in that moment in glorious ways: as loving, holy, compassionate, a deliverer, present, self-existent, and sovereign. Rather than giving Moses a name, God gave him a statement of being: "I AM WHO I AM." And then God told Moses what He was going to do and how it would involve Moses:

¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, ¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:16–17 - ESV).

God had chosen Moses to deliver His message to Israel and Pharaoh and to lead the people out of bondage and into a new relationship with their creator God. Moses is going to be the man whom God uses to bring His message to Israel, confront Pharaoh, challenge the power of the Egyptian gods, and lead them for the next 40 years.

Before Moses can be the man whom God uses to lead Israel out of the greatest deliverance moment in her entire history, he must deal with fundamental issues of trust and obedience. In other words, God only uses those who trust and obey.

And as we look at Moses' life, we need to keep two other things in mind: 1) the way in which Jesus perfectly trusted and perfectly obeyed, and 2) the implications for our lives as we learn the value of trusting and obeying.

¹ <http://www.sharefaith.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/trust-and-obey-the-song-and-the-story.html>

The Trust Issue

After Moses hears about God's mission for him and the people of Israel, chapter four records three significant excuses or objections which are raised by Moses. These follow the call God issues to Moses, and he has to work through his past, his fears, and his doubts. Even though he has learned great truths about God at the burning bush, there is still an important process that Moses is working through. In other words, Moses' trust had to be exercised and built.

Objection #1: "They won't believe me"

The first issue that Moses raises is regarding the people of Israel and their belief in him. Notice the tone of verse one. It is not very tentative. Moses is pretty sure that the people will not believe him: *"But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'"* (Ex. 4:1). In some respects this objection is a bit justified. It has been 40 years since he left Egypt, and if anyone remembered who he was, it wasn't positive.

Therefore, God gives Moses three supernatural signs which he is to use in order to prove that he is on a divine mission: a staff that turns into a snake, a leprous hand that is healed, and the turning of water from the Nile into blood. Now these signs were not just for the people of Israel, they were faith-building moments for Moses as well.

It is interesting to note that in all three cases, God uses something familiar and personal to Moses – his staff, his hand, and river he knew growing up. In all three cases, they take on a different form – a scary form. And in all three cases, Moses has to do something "by faith" in order for the sign to work.

In verses 2-3, we see that Moses was told to throw down his staff, and it became a snake. Moses' understandable and very human response was to run! Wouldn't you have done the same thing? There is just something about snakes that make you want to run. The way they slither and slide along the ground, the way they strike, and the forked tongue that keeps shooting out invites humans to "book it." But then God tests Moses. In verse four, God says the following: *"Put out your hand and catch it by the tail."* You don't have to be a herpetologist to know that picking up a snake by the tail is a bad idea; it accentuates the danger. But this is what Moses is told to do. Moses follows God's instructions and the snake turns back into his staff.

Verse five is interesting to me. God tells Moses that he is to do this sign so *"that they may 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"* (Ex. 4:5). I wonder if part of God's words were also directed at Moses.

The second sign involves a scary disease. Moses is told in verse six to put his hand inside his cloak, and when he removes his hand it is full of leprosy. This particular disease name was given for any number of skin conditions that plagued the people of the Ancient Near East. It was greatly feared because the cure rate was very low, and it usually meant that the person was isolated from the rest and lived with other lepers until their death. It was viewed as highly contagious, and it typically spread from one area of body to another. Throughout the Bible, leprosy had a physical and a spiritual connotation to it.

So you can imagine Moses' horror when he sees his hand removed from his own cloak filled with this terrible disease. And you can also imagine the fear in putting it back into his cloak. But that is what he is told to do, and what he does. The result (v 7) was that "it was restored like the rest of the flesh."

The final sign that Moses is given is directly related to the Nile and will be repeated in the Ten Plagues. Verse nine identifies the specifics:

⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground (Exodus 4:9).

The Nile, as we'll see when we study the Ten Plagues, was worshipped by the Egyptians and was the center of Egyptian life. The Nile was the source of physical life in Egypt since it provided irrigation, animal life, and rich soil when it flooded. Most people who lived in Egypt lived in close proximity to the great river. To turn it to blood was not only a miracle; it was also a statement.

For that matter, all the signs were a statement. The staff-to-snake miracle was designed to show God's power to make a harmless staff dangerous and then safe again. The leprosy miracle showed God's power over disease. He can heal, strike, and heal at will. God controls things that create fear, he controls physical diseases, and he is greater than the gods of Egypt. Each of the three signs is designed to communicate God's worthiness of trust and belief.

Objection #2: "I am not eloquent"

The second object is found in verse 10 as Moses says "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and tongue." What is this all about?

Some people have suggested that Moses had some level of speech defect or impediment or that he wasn't very good with words. However, as you'll see in the rest of Exodus, Moses does much of the talking – both to the people and to Pharaoh. Rather it seems that Moses is looking for another excuse or reason why he is not fit for the task. We'll see where this leads in verse 12, but for now just notice that Moses is expressing a lack of self-confidence. The task seems so great, and he is not sure that he is really qualified. Moses is questioning God's wisdom in selecting him for this task.

Notice God's response. He points Moses back to Himself: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (v 11). Again, we see the pattern of God first directing Moses' attention back to the essence of who God is. As I've said before: "The "Who?" is far more important than "Why?" or "When?" or "How?"" And then God tells Moses that "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (v 12). God promises that Moses will be empowered.

I find it interesting that there is fine line between God-centered humility and self-centered self-deprecation. And trust is at the core of the difference. Self-centered self-deprecation puts too much emphasis on what "I can or cannot do." It often stems from a fear of failure, a fear of looking bad, or being embarrassed. There are some people who will not do anything unless they are 100%

sure it will work out. And while it may sound humble at first, a trust problem is really the problem. God-centered humility says, "I can't do this on my own, but I'm going to trust that You'll give me what I need to follow You. I can't figure it all out right now, but I'll trust You to give me the grace I need."

Moses needed to learn the difference between trusting in his abilities and trusting in God, something every follower of Jesus needs to learn.

Objection #3: "Send someone else"

The third and final objection creates some tension in the text, and we get a sense of what is going on inside Moses' heart. In verse 13, he simply says, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." Moses actually tries to refuse this call from God.

We have other examples of this in the Bible and the result is always the same: God's call always wins. Take Jonah for example. He refuses to preach to the people of Ninevah, runs away to Tarshish, is in danger at sea, swallowed by a fish, vomited on the shore, and then decides to follow God's call. One of my favorite examples of this is Jeremiah 20:9 when the prophet is weary from the task of ministry, and he is ready to "throw in the towel."

⁹ If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (Jeremiah 20:9).

The calling from your creator is not optional, nor is it wise to resist. Verse 14 tells us that Moses' response kindled the anger of the Lord against him, and God mercifully supplied Aaron as an assistant.

"Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. ¹⁶ He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him" (Exodus 4:14-16).

Aaron is introduced here as the co-speaker for Moses. Eventually this will lead into Aaron's role as the High Priest and the establishment of the Levitical Priesthood. Moses will be the prophet, and Aaron will be the priest. Moses will speak for God, and Aaron will lead the people spiritually. Aaron is sent to Moses not as his spokesman but as his faithful companion who will assist Moses in the confrontation of Pharaoh and the leadership of the people.

Notice how kind God is in the moment. Despite Moses' resistance and God's justifiable anger, He provides a co-laborer to encourage Moses in the work of ministry to which he has been called. Instead of killing Moses for his lack of trust, God provides support and help. God could have annihilated him; instead He empowered him.

Finally, the text ends with a reference to Moses' staff: "Take in your hand this staff with which you shall do the signs" (v 17). This staff will be very significant in the coming chapters, but suffice it to say here that this staff represents the power and authority given to him from God. It was a symbol of God's empowerment and the means by which he will do many miracles.

Before we move into the second point, what does section have to do with you and Jesus? Trusting in God is the essence of Christianity; it is where a relationship with Jesus starts as we put our faith in Him for the forgiveness of our sins. We trust that God will count Jesus' death as sufficient for us. But it doesn't stop there. We have to trust Him when our future is uncertain, when your reputation has been maligned, when you are waiting for a diagnosis, and when you feel discontent with the circumstances of your life. What's more, we have to trust Him when He gives us assignments or opportunities for which we feel unqualified, when we feel inadequate or unproven, when we've failed before, and when we are fearful. The essence and the beauty of Christianity is the call to trust.

Even Jesus modeled this. Think of the greatest struggle ever seen on earth as Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, pours out His heart to God about the coming suffering. Remember what He said:

³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus trusted the Father's plan, and without that trust there would be nothing for you and me to trust. His trust created the possibility of ours. Christianity is about trust.

The Obedience Issue

The second lesson that Moses must learn is the issue of obedience. Trust is a vital and foundational part a relationship with God, but so is obedience. Think with me, for instance, as to what we hear in the Great Commission:

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20 - NIV).

Obedience is what we are called to teach people to do. Obedience is what was promised in the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33 – "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." True obedience from the heart is the goal of the gospel. God aims to save people from their sins so that they obey Him.

We will see this play out in Exodus. After God delivers His people from Egypt, He will bring them to Mt. Sinai and declare to them his law - first deliverance then obedience. What's more, Pharaoh himself will say, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice?" (Ex. 5:2).

Therefore, it is important for Moses, as the future leader of Israel, to learn this lesson.

This section begins with Moses returning to Jethro, his father-in-law, for his blessing in returning to Egypt. As a part of the culture of Moses' day, the blessing of his father-in-law would have been secured out of respect and gratitude for his kindness (4:18). After receiving the blessing, Moses took his family and began the journey back to Egypt (4:19-20). Be sure to notice that again the staff is mentioned – "the staff of God was in his hand"(v 20).

Verses 21-23 are a prequel to what will come in the story of Exodus. Over the next number of months, we will look at these issues in depth so let's look at the highlights right now:

- Moses is on his way to Pharaoh, and he will perform the miracles that God has put in Moses' power (v 21).
- God will harden Pharaoh's heart (v 21). We'll explore this much more later, but let me just highlight the sovereign control of God over the entire situation, including Pharaoh's heart. Yet Pharaoh is also guilty of hardening his own heart. They are two sides of the same coin.
- Pharaoh will not let the people go (v 21).
- God will call Israel His "firstborn son," and when Pharaoh refuses to let Israel go, God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son (v 23). In other words, it is firstborn son for firstborn son.

Again, it is a prequel of what is to come.

It is verses 24-26 that are our primary focus, and it is a very intriguing and instructive story. Let's read it and then I'll explain the meaning.

²⁴ At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision (Exodus 4:24-26)

Somewhere on their journey to Egypt, Moses' family encounters a life or death situation. The text is not entirely clear as to whose life was in danger. It could be Moses or, more likely, his son Gershom since much of the previous narrative is about the firstborn son. The NIV supplies the name "Moses" in verse 24, but it is actually the word "him."

We are not sure what this life-threatening situation looked like. It may have been some kind of illness where it was clear that Moses' family was under the judgment of God. Regardless, while the life-threatening situation is not clear, the way they were rescued is very clear. Zipporah, his Midian wife, circumcised their son and was able to rescue either Moses or his son. Her actions satisfied God such that "he left him alone" (v 25).

Let me try to explain what I think is happening here. Circumcision was the signature mark of covenantal ownership for the Jewish people. It was the proof of sonship, and Zipporah must have understood this. The sign of the covenant harkens all the way back to the days of Abraham, and it was a foundational matter of obedience for God's people. Let's look a few important texts:

¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised...¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Genesis 17:10, 14).

Moses had neglected a very basic issue of obedience, and God was not about to let him lead the people of Israel out of Egypt without dealing with this obedience issue directly. As Doug Stuart says, "Even as he headed down to Egypt, he still did not have all the aspects of his life (in this case his family life) in order."² And this was likely a wake-up call to Moses. His reluctance needed to be trumped with trust, and his spiritual laziness needed to be trumped with full obedience.

² Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 155.

Zipporah saved their family by becoming the family mediator through blood. It seems likely that is what is meant by her comment “you are a bridegroom of blood.” Zipporah’s obedience saved her family from judgment.

The Bible never paints Moses as a perfect man. In fact, some serious and consequential mistakes are recorded for us (see Deut. 32:48-52). But it seems pretty clear that Moses recorded this moment to emphasize something every follower of Jesus needs to hear: obedience matters.

Salvation by faith alone is glorious. But it was meant to be followed with good works. In other words, we were saved for the purpose of obedience:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8–10)

The beauty of the gospel is that it not only saves us from condemnation; it also liberates us toward sanctification. The call of follow Jesus is the call to be obedient, to be righteous, and to be godly. And if you want to be a spiritual leader who is a part of God’s mission, you must, first and foremost, be godly. You must be obedient.

But there is one more thing that we have to just savor here. It is the beautiful fact that our prophet, priest, and king – Jesus – led His people out of bondage by perfectly keeping the Law and then becoming the blood sacrifice to spare us the wrath of God. Here is how Hebrews 5:8-9 captures this truth:

⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8–9)

Jesus obeyed so that it is even possible for us to obey. We don’t do it in our own strength. But obedience is what God aims to produce in us. It starts with salvation, and obedience is the fruit.

*Trust and obey for there’s no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey*

Where’s does God find you today? Do you need to trust Him? Are you in a place that requires a renewed commitment to believe that He is able? Do you need to consider obedience in a new way? Are you content with little areas of partial obedience? Are you justifying a half-hearted pursuit of God today?

Trust and obey. It was what Moses needed to learn. It is what we need to learn. It is what Jesus did.

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