

**– Chapter Four –**

As chapter 3 ends, Moses is standing on holy ground near the base of Mt. Sinai, speaking with the ***“God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”*** – the Great I AM – through a burning bush. He now knows that he has been selected to return to Egypt, face the Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of bondage and on to their new home in the Promised Land. He is reluctant to accept this leadership role, but before we label his resistance as a weakness, let’s remember the circumstances under which he left Egypt 40 years before. Moses doesn’t know how to face the Israelites with news that the ***“God of your fathers has sent me to you.”*** He is afraid they won’t believe him. Why would they? It isn’t as though he can just relate the story of his burning bush encounter and expect them to fall in line behind him.

The Israelites will need to “see to believe”, so God decides to give Moses two signs (miracles?) that he will use to demonstrate to them that the Creator of the universe has sent him – proof that the Almighty God is “vouching” for Moses and will be guiding him each step of the way. It’s hard to know just how much the Israelites understand about God in their current situation, at the mercy of Egyptian taskmasters, but we should assume that the stories of their forefathers had been passed down to them and they would know enough to recognize that a true miracle could only come from Him. If they do not believe after the first sign, God says they might be convinced after the second. So Moses’ staff is turned into a snake then back to a staff, and his hand, when placed next to his chest then drawn out, is made leprous, then restored to good health again when he repeats the gesture. But, in case they are still not convinced, God says (verse 9) ***“...you shall take water from the river and pour it on the dry land. The water which you take from the river will become blood on the dry land.”***

I am certain Moses believes what God has just told and shown him, but in spite of it all, he still wishes for someone else to be sent in his place. His “Not me, Lord...” statements remind me of Abraham’s discussion with God when he was pleading for Sodom: ***“Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once...”*** (Gen. 18:32). It seems as though Moses knows he is trying God’s patience, yet after his “Who am I to do this?” objection and his “What if they won’t listen?”

concern, he voices one final reason why he believes God should select someone else: ***“O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”***

I think it’s important to discuss Moses’ reasons for asking to pass this responsibility to someone else. I have heard it expressed both in the pulpit and in commentaries that Moses is simply making excuses because he doesn’t want to go. I don’t think that’s giving him the respect he deserves. Yes, verse 14 does say the ***“anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses,”*** but NOT because he was simply being lazy or fearful.

Let’s look back to Moses’ first objection from chapter 3: ***“Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh, and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt.”*** ( 3:11) This isn’t so much a refusal as an expression of an opinion that he might not be the best person for the job! Remember, it has been 40 years since he left Egypt. The Israelites had almost no association with him when he was there, and the older ones would know that he fled the country under penalty of death at the hands of the Pharaoh. So, it’s not unreasonable to expect that his showing up, more or less “out of the blue”, telling them he was sent by Jehovah, might be met with skepticism. I believe God recognized this as a legitimate concern and thus provided the signs for Moses to convince the people of his God-given authority.

What about his speaking limitations? Remember the scripture we looked at Acts 7:22 where Luke records Stephen saying, ***“Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.”*** How can a man who is ***“mighty in words”*** also be “not eloquent” and “slow of speech”?

The word ***“eloquent”*** was translated from two Hebrew words: ***“eesh”*** meaning ***“man”*** and ***“daw-bawr”*** meaning a ***“manner”*** and suggesting the ***“ability to commune or counsel”***. So, when Moses said he was ***“not eloquent”***, he was saying that he did not

communicate in a manner that was pleasing or comfortable to hear. In other words, he was blunt and direct – a quality detectable even during this conversation with God.

Perhaps you can relate to Moses in this way, as I can. In my younger years, I was told the same – that I was too plain-spoken and to-the-point with people and as a result, could at times come across as insensitive. It has taken a great deal of work to get to where I am now, even though I admit a little of the “old me” peeks out sometimes. I suspect Moses might have been afraid this particular trait would not help him “win friends and influence people” either.

Let’s look at the second part of his self-critique: “*slow of speech*” and a “*slow tongue*”. The word translated “*slow*” in both instances is the Hebrew word “*kaw-bade*” which Strong defines as “**deep**”, “**heavy**,” “**hard**,” or “**severe**.” Many commentators believe “*deep*” is best – “*deep speech*” implying that he stuttered. But, others suggest it just means he wasn’t “quick on his feet”, that is, able to produce the right words on the spur of the moment. The word “**severe**” seems to suggest that bluntness I referred to above. An additional possibility is the fact that he hasn’t spoken Hebrew in 40 years. (Midianites spoke something called Telugu.) Maybe a sluggish recall of the language would hinder his ability to communicate well with the Israelites. Which of these options is correct? We don’t know. But it seems obvious that he did not believe he had the necessary communication skills to carry out this task

In the next verses, God directs Moses to put aside the anxiety he feels about his weaknesses and remember exactly who he is dealing with here: “*Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.*”

Moses’ response is so very human. Consider the circumstances of this conversation. He is speaking to the divine Creator through a burning bush. He has just been shown two miracles further demonstrating His power and, to top it off, has been assured in God’s own voice that “*I*

*will be with you and teach you what to say*” yet he still responds with: **“O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send.”** Are we not like this? We are often reminded in scripture of how God has promised to care for us, yet we worry and fret over things that God has assured us He will handle. **“So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and He said: “Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he is coming out to meet you. When he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.”**

Moses is not in an enviable position here, having “kindled” God’s anger. But, Spence says this: *“The expression God used is a strong one, but does not appear to mean more than that God was displeased.”* He certainly doesn’t punish Moses for his plea to be released from this duty, except maybe to withhold the “cure” for his speech problems. Instead, He arranges for a member of his own family to assist Moses In this daunting task.

Do the words **“And also, behold, he is coming out to meet you...”** mean that Aaron was there, walking toward them? Notice the rest of the phrase: **“and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.”** Aaron is still in Egypt, remember. It isn’t until verse 27 that we learn that God has appeared to Moses’ brother: **“ And the Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him.”**



Aaron had quite a long trip ahead as he journeyed to meet Moses at the “Mount of God”. Assuming he was still living with Jethro (Reuel) in the blue area on the map, Moses would have followed the black line to the mount, like he did with the sheep when he saw the burning bush. The straight green line shows the distance as the crow flies, and represents 50

miles. It might have taken Moses and his family 3 days to get there. Aaron, however, has a much

longer trip (the red line) and in order for them to rendezvous at the same time, we can assume he got his instructions from God at least two weeks prior. It must have been a joyful reunion for them, 40 years in the making. We know they had a lot to talk about: ***And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord who had sent him, and all the signs which he had commanded him.*** (4:28)

So, knowing that Aaron is already on his way to Midian to meet with his brother, we return in our story to Moses, as he breaks the news to his father-in-law that he and his family are leaving. ***“So Moses went and returned to Jethro... and said to him, ‘Please let me go and return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive...’*** Moses going to Jethro and asking permission to go back to Egypt was not just a courtesy to his family. As Spence points out, if we are correct in our assumption that Moses had been accepted into the Midianite nation – as I’m sure he was since he had been there for 40 years – then he would need permission from the tribal head to leave. Jethro, being the priest, was that head, and he offered no opposition to Moses returning to Egypt. ***“... And Jethro said to Moses, ‘Go in peace.’***

***Now the Lord said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead.’ Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.’ (4: 18-21)***

And then, in verses 24 - 26 we come upon a piece of scripture that seems to be a “stand alone” passage that causes many readers some difficulty. It reads: ***“And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the Lord met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses’ feet, and said, ‘Surely you are a husband of blood to me!’ So He let him go. Then she said, ‘You are a husband of blood!’—because of the circumcision.’”***

Apparently not long after leaving Midian, one evening, Moses and his family came to a place to spend the night – some versions say “an inn”. Obviously, this wouldn’t be the sort of inn we imagine, but perhaps a “*Khans*” or “*Caravanserais*” which were (and are still) unfurnished

buildings, open to all travelers, mostly free of charge. They are little more than a roof overhead, because the travelers provide their own food, bedding, etc. Some scholars suggest it wasn't even this, but more likely just a recognized place near a well, suitable for spending the night.

The text says the Lord ***“met him and sought to kill him”***. Among respected commentators (Knobel, Kalisch, Rosenmuller, Canon Cook) it is thought that Moses had a sudden seizure, followed by a dangerous illness that threatened his life, but the words ***“the Lord met him”*** seem to suggest a miraculous appearance. The puzzling part is that the text does seem to indicate a direct intent by God to end Moses' life! We are not told the reason, but from what follows I think it is because he had neglected to circumcise his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Some say this was because they were not living in a Jewish community, but in Midian. We don't know why, but it is obvious with the words ***“so He let him go”***, that the circumcision of the boys solved the problem. Notice that it is his wife, Zipporah, who does the impromptu procedure. I suppose Moses was quite ill, on his deathbed even, and couldn't. And what about the phrase: ***“You are a husband of blood to me.”*** It is clearly a reproach. The gist seems to be that Moses had cost her dearly, causing the blood of her sons to be shed in order to keep up an Israelite tradition which she, a Midianite, regarded as barbarous. At any rate, God accepted this circumcision, because when the cause for the offense was finally removed, He allowed Moses to live.

In verse 29, the journey to Egypt is complete, and we find Moses and Aaron in Goshen with a gathering of all the Israelite elders, sharing their very important news. Aaron is tasked with revealing all that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and the signs are done to convince the people Who had sent them. It is unclear whether Aaron or Moses did the signs, but we know the elders were convinced: ***“And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped.”*** In chapter 5, Moses and Aaron will face the Pharaoh for the first time, but before we proceed to that lesson, I would like to leave us with some additional thoughts:

1. God waited 80 years to reveal to Moses in a burning bush that he was His choice to lead Israel out of bondage. Forty years earlier, Moses had occupied a high place of importance in Egypt. What a spectacle it would have created for him to have been called at that time, when he was “on top of the world”. But, God waited until Moses had been “brought low”. A simple shepherd caring for his father-in-law’s sheep would be their “savior”.
2. Scientists – even those who accept the authenticity of the biblical texts which describe Moses’ encounter with the burning bush – still can’t bring themselves to believe it really happened. They have tried to explain away the miracle with various feeble theories. Some say it was a “gas-plant” – vegetation which emits a flammable substance. Others claim the fire was caused by a volcanic vent near the bush. And still others say it must have been merely a plant with red flowers, emitting no real fire at all. The scripture clearly states that it was a bush which burned but was never consumed. How sad that there are so many who refuse to acknowledge the limitless power of our Creator.
3. God's name as He refers to Himself here – **I AM** – reveals His independent existence and eternal nature, unbound by time either past, present or future. Jesus Christ used this term to express his divinity: *“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM.”* (John 8:58) At this point the Jews, horrified by this statement, picked up stones to kill Jesus. The Pharisees believed in the **I AM** of the Old Testament, but for Jesus to claim to be this **I AM** as well was to put himself on the same level as God. And they viewed this as blasphemy.
4. In reference to the burning bush, old Jewish commentators from the first few centuries after Jesus’ death have something to say which merits our consideration: the bush “which burns but is not consumed” is a message for the Israelites – they would face hardships in Egypt, but not be defeated (consumed) by their afflictions.
5. Let’s revisit the scene where God *“sought to kill Moses”*, apparently because his sons had not been circumcised. As I said, the suggestion has been made that this could be because

Moses was no longer living in a Jewish community, and therefore saw no need. Does the extreme manner in which God got his attention show us today just how important it is that we keep His commandments...no matter where we are? In Genesis 17, we read that those who were not circumcised were separated from those who were – thus, no longer considered God’s people. Regardless of our circumstances, we never cease to be one of God’s own – with expectations to behave accordingly.

Lesson 5, Moses’ audience with the Pharaoh, awaits us.