

Exodus 3:1-6

Introduction

Last week, we saw Moses burst triumphantly onto the scene as the would be deliverer of Israel, only to quickly find himself an exile in the land of Midian, rejected by his own people, and his life forfeit to the king of Egypt. The Moses who had all the right “credentials,” including a sincere and well-intentioned heart, was not yet ready for the job. God would use this apparent failure, and rejection, and forty years of exile in Midian to teach Moses humility – to empty Moses of himself so that he might be a *useful vessel* in *God’s* hands. And so chapter three begins:

I. Exodus 3:1 — Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian...

Shepherding was, at the very least, a humble occupation. We know from what Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 46 that in Egypt shepherds were despised – though this certainly wouldn’t have been the case among the Israelites. (Gen. 46:34) After forty years in Midian, Moses was still keeping not his own flock, but the flock of his father-in-law. Basically, the circumstances of Moses in chapter three couldn’t be more starkly different from his circumstances in chapter two. In chapter two, Moses was the man of privilege living in the house of an Egyptian princess. In chapter three, Moses is a shepherd keeping another man’s flock. Could this be a part of the way God was preparing Moses for the task of “shepherding” his people, Israel? It’s interesting that the next great leader of Israel after Moses (King David) will also be a former shepherd. The psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 78:70–72 — [The Lord] chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.

And so it will also be with Moses. The Psalmist writes again:

- ✓ Psalm 77:20 (cf. Numbers 27:15-17) — You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

One day as Moses nears the end of his life, he’ll pray this prayer:

- ✓ Numbers 27:15–17 — “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation... who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”

One thing we can know for sure: Not a single one of Moses’ forty years in Midian was wasted. While Moses has settled comfortably into his new life of obscurity (2:21) and put aside all his previous thoughts of being the deliverer of his people, God had not set aside His plan even for a moment. God is wholly sovereign even in what we call “delays.” Even in what might appear to

us to be a waste of time, God never ceases to be at work in the accomplishing of His purposes. And so we go on to read:

II. Exodus 3:1 — 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 came to Horeb, the mountain of God.*

Mount Horeb is Mount Sinai – the place where God will one day come down in fire and smoke, and make His laws and ways known to the people of Israel. It was for this reason that Mount Horeb would *eventually* come to be known as the “mountain of God.”*

Now Horeb was a long way away from Moses’ home in Midian – probably at least a couple of week’s journey. Had Moses led the flock in that direction for better grazing? Had there been a draught in the usual places where the flocks were pastured? We don’t know why Moses had traveled so far from home, except to say that in the plan of God it was clearly no accident. It was ultimately God Himself who led Moses on this week’s long journey to the mountain that would soon come to be known as the “mountain of God.” But why? What is the reason for bringing Moses *here*?

III. Exodus 3:2 — And *the angel of the LORD appeared to him* in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

Who is this “angel of YAHWEH” that suddenly appears to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush? Only two verses later, we read these words: “**God** called to [Moses] *out of the bush*,” and then in verse six, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at **God**.” In other places, the angel of the LORD says things that would be wrong and even blasphemous for anyone other than *God Himself* to say – not even the highest archangels in glory.†

- ✓ **Genesis 31:11–13** — Then *the angel of God* said to me in the dream... “**I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me...**”
- ✓ **Judges 2:1–2** — *The angel of the LORD...* said, “**I** brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. **I** said, ‘I will never break *my* covenant with you... But you have not *obeyed my voice*.’”

But if this is God Himself who appears to Moses in the flaming bush, then *why* refer to God Himself as the “angel of Yahweh”? In other places, the angel of the LORD is distinguished from YAHWEH as someone different.

- ✓ **2 Samuel 24:16–17** — *The LORD* relented from the calamity and *said to the angel* who was working destruction among the people, “It is enough; now stay your hand.” And *the angel of*

* It wouldn’t have been known by that name when Moses first came there with his father-in-law’s flocks, but *by the time* Moses was recording what had happened, he, and all of his readers, would have been very familiar with Mount Horeb as uniquely the mountain of God.

† **Zechariah 12:8** — On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be *like God, like the angel of the LORD*, going before them.

the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. *Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking the people...*

- ✓ Zechariah 1:12-14 — Then *the angel of the LORD said, “O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah...?”* And *the LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts...*

So in some places the “angel of the LORD” and the LORD are equated as one and the same. In other places the “angel of the LORD” and the LORD are clearly distinguished as different from each other. And in other places, we see the angel of the LORD clearly appearing as God Himself, and yet *at the same time* seeming to speak of God as though He were someone else.[‡]

- ✓ Genesis 22:11-12, 15-16 — *The angel of the LORD* called to [Abraham] from heaven and said... “Now I know that *you fear God*, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, *from me.*” ... And *the angel of the LORD* called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, “By myself I have sworn, *declares the LORD...*”
- ✓ Exodus 20:22; 23:20-21 — *The LORD said* to Moses... “Behold, *I send an angel before you* to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for *my name is in him.*”

So how should we understand this mystery? One of the ways that the angel of the LORD is clearly *different* from Yahweh is that He can *sit under a tree*, He can *reach out and physically touch a human being*,[§] he can *turn and look with his eyes* (Judges 6:12-16), and he can be seen doing all of these things by human beings. He appears to people even in the shape of a man, veiling his glory, so that sometimes they don’t even know with whom they are talking!

- ✓ Judges 6:11, 17, 22 — Now *the angel of the LORD* came and *sat under the terebinth at Ophrah...* And [Gideon] said to [the angel of the LORD], “If now I have found favor in your

[‡] Judges 6:12, 14, 16 — And *the angel of the LORD* appeared to [Gideon] and said to him, “*The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.*” ... The LORD *turned to him* and said... “*I will be with you...*”

Numbers 22:31-32 — Then *the LORD* opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw *the angel of the LORD* standing in the way... And *the angel of the LORD* said to him... “Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse *before me.*”

Genesis 16:10-11 — *The angel of the LORD...* said to [Hagar], “*I will surely multiply your offspring...*” And *the angel of the LORD* said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because *the LORD* has listened to your affliction.”

Exodus 14:19, 24 — Then *the angel of God* who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them... And *in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud* looked down on the Egyptian forces...

Zechariah 3:1-2, 6-7 — Then he showed me Joshua the high priest *standing before the angel of the LORD*, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And *the LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you...* And *the angel of the LORD* solemnly assured Joshua, “*Thus says the LORD of hosts...*”

Judges 13:15-18, 22 — *The angel of the LORD* said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then *offer it to the LORD.*” And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name...?” And *the angel of the LORD* said to him, “*Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?*”

[§] 1 Kings 19:7 — And *the angel of the LORD* came again a second time and *touched [Elijah]* and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.”

eyes, then *show me a sign that it is you who speak with me... Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD.*

- ✓ Judges 13:10–11, 16-17, 21 — Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to *the man* and said to him, “*Are you the man* who spoke to this woman?” And he said, “I am.” ... (*Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.*) And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “*What is your name...?*” ... *Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD.*

Gideon and Manoah didn’t know at first who they were talking to because the angel of the LORD appeared to them as just another man. But when they did finally realize the truth, what immediately happens? They both fear for their lives.

- ✓ Judges 6:22-23 — Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now *I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.*” But the LORD said to him, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.”
- ✓ Judges 13:3, 5, 15-18, 22 — Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for *we have seen God.*”

So how are we to understand the mystery of the angel of the LORD? For right now, it’s enough to say this: “*In the Angel of the Lord [Yahweh] is fully present.*” (Davidson; quoted in Motyer) We read in Isaiah:

- ✓ Isaiah 63:8–9 — [*The LORD*] said, “Surely [the people of Israel] are my people, children who will not deal falsely.” And *he became their Savior... the angel of his PRESENCE saved them.*

In the angel of the LORD, the presence of God comes among men. But then we might ask, in the words of one commentator: “What *reason*... would there be for God to take the form of an angel in so many instances? Why not just show up in person, as it were?” (Stuart) Well, Exodus chapter three answers that question for us.

IV. Exodus 3:2 — And the angel of the LORD appeared to him *in a flame of fire* out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

Here in Exodus three, the angel of the Lord is clothed (and even hidden) in flames of fire. (cf. Motyer) Throughout the Bible, *fire* is connected over and over again with the presence of God. In Genesis 3:24, we read that the presence of God in the garden (symbolized by the tree of life) is guarded by the cherubim and a flaming sword. In Genesis 15 when God comes down to make a covenant with Abraham, His presence is represented by a “smoking fire pot and a flaming torch.” (Gen. 15:17) In Leviticus 9, God commanded that the people of Israel should bring sacrifices to the tabernacle promising that He would appear to them that very day. This is what happened:

- ✓ Leviticus 9:24 — *Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed* the burnt offering... and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

We read in Leviticus ten:

- ✓ Leviticus 10:1–2 (cf. 2 Kings 1:10-12) — Now Nadab and Abihu... offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And *fire came out from before the LORD and consumed* them.

Moses warns the people of Israel in Deuteronomy:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 4:23–24 — Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God... For the LORD your God is a consuming fire.

And the Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 50:3; 97:3 — Our God comes... before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest... Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.

So why doesn't God just show up in person, as it were? Because no *human being* can be in God's naked, unveiled presence – and live. If Abraham, or Hagar, or Moses, or Gideon, or Manoah or David had ever truly seen Yahweh *as he is* – had ever truly been in the presence of Yahweh *as He is* – then he would have been consumed, destroyed, incinerated by the God who *is* a consuming fire. God will one day say to Moses:

- ✓ Exodus 33:20 — You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.

Paul speaks of the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” (1 Timothy 6:16) But why is this? Why should God be to us – to His own creation – as a fire that consumes?

“And *the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire* out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.”

V. Exodus 3:3 — And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.”

Moses does not yet know his peril. There is a sense in which his life is in infinitely greater danger now than it ever was when he was placed on the river Nile in an ark, or when he was fleeing for his life from the King of Egypt. There is nothing, and no one in the entire universe more dangerous or more deadly than God is. And as we see in the next two verses, the fact that the bush was not consumed does not mean that God had suddenly become “safe.”

VI. Exodus 3:4–5 — When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here 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.”

Why should God be to us – to His own creation – as a fire that consumes? The simple answer is this: Because He is **HOLY**. The basic meaning of “holiness” is “*separateness*.” In verse six

Moses will hide his face, being afraid to look at God. But in Isaiah chapter six, even the angelic Seraphim who stand perpetually in the very throne room of God all cover their faces as they call out to one another, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts!” Why should even the sinless angelic host cover their faces in the presence of God? Because the holiness of God means that He is separate from, and apart from, and infinitely far away from the angels. As John Snyder says:

“[God] possesses the solitary glory of being the only Uncreated One. Thus, all else is beneath His dignity. In truth, the highest archangel is closer to a worm than he is to God because the angel and the worm are in the category of created things, while God is not.”

But if by the very nature of who He is, God is a “danger” even to the angels so that they cover their faces when they stand in His presence, *how much more* will God be as a consuming fire to us who have been stained and defiled by sin? (cf. Job 15:15-16) God is separate from the angels because He is the only uncreated being. But God is separate from *us* because not *only* is He uncreated, He is *pure*, hating and loathing all that is in any way impure (cf. Psalm 5:4-6), and loving only those things that perfectly reflect His nature, and His character, and His absolute righteousness. How can we possibly hear these things and not feel what the prophet Isaiah felt?

✓ Isaiah 6:5 (NASB) — Woe is me! For I am ruined; for I am *a man of unclean lips!*

God is to all of us, as *human beings* who are *sinful and fallen*, a consuming fire. Throughout the Bible, flaming fire is the symbol of that most perilous, and most dangerous, and most deadly thing in all the universe – the **HOLY** God. (cf. Motyer) **And yet** even as we cry out, “Woe is me, for I am ruined!” we hear God speaking words of mercy and of grace. “Do not come near.” God has already spared Moses’ life by *coming to him* not in His naked, unveiled glory, but rather as the angel of the Lord. God has already spared Moses’ life by mercifully keeping His own *distance* from Moses. And now God would again spare Moses’ life by calling to him from the bush as he turns aside to come closer, and giving him this gracious warning: “Do not come *near*; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” The **holy God** would **appear** to Moses and **speak with him in person**, and yet He does not desire that Moses be consumed! And we see just *why* this is in verse six.

VII. Exodus 3:6a — And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

In other words, I am the God who has purposed to save, and to redeem, and to bless. I am the God who makes promises, and who keeps My promises. I am the God who enters into the intimacy of covenant relationship with my called and chosen people.

And so the message of these verses seems to be this: If you would experience the blessings and intimacy of relationship with Me – if you would experience my salvation – then the very first lesson you must learn is that I am holy – and my holiness is a consuming fire. If Moses is to be equipped to lead the people of God, then by far *the* most important, and *the* most paramount lesson for him to learn is that the Holy God is *always*, and *unceasingly*, a consuming fire. It is

this God, and no other, who *saves*, and *redeems*, and *leads*, and *shepherds* His people. So verse six concludes:

VIII. Exodus 3:6b — And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Why did God bring Moses to *this mountain* to teach him *this lesson*? Perhaps because it will also be on this mountain that God will descend in fire before the entire nation of Israel. We read in Exodus 19:

- ✓ Exodus 19:18 — Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln.

And then just as God warned Moses here in chapter three, so He will mercifully and graciously tell Moses to warn the people in chapter nineteen:

- ✓ Exodus 19:12–13, 21–24 — “You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it’... The LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.”

If Israel is to be God’s people, the first and most important lesson they must learn is that God is holy. He is, unceasingly, a consuming fire. It is *this* God, and no other, who *saves*, and *redeems*, and *leads*, and *shepherds* His people.

Remember “the angel of the LORD” who is both identified as YAHWEH *and* also distinguished from YAHWEH? We read in John chapter one:

- ✓ John 1:1 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with God*, and the Word *was God*.

It would seem that in the Old Testament, “the angel of the LORD” *was* the eternal Word revealed in the form of an angel. He was both *with* God, and *was* God. But at no time did the Word ever *become* an angel. In the New Testament, the angel of the LORD never appears – not even once. The Angel of the LORD has been “fulfilled” in Jesus Christ. The Apostle John writes:

- ✓ John 1:14, 18 — And the Word *became flesh* and dwelt among us, and *we have seen his glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, *full of grace and truth*... *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*

Jesus Himself said:

- ✓ John 6:46; 14:9 (cf. Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3) — [No one] has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

So in Jesus is fulfilled God's kind intention to dwell among us as our God *without* us being consumed by the deadly fire of His holiness. This doesn't mean that Jesus is "harmless" and "safe" to all. Paul says in Thessalonians:

- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 — The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels *in flaming fire*, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

But through His suffering and death on the cross in the place of sinners, "Jesus [has become] to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." (Heb. 5:9; NASB) And so in Zechariah, God can speak of *this* future day:

- ✓ Zechariah 2:5 — I will be to [my people] *a wall of fire all around*, declares the LORD, and I will be *the glory in [their] midst*.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a day when God is approached lightly and tritely, as though He were no longer a consuming fire. We think that because Jesus has come, the fire has been put out, and now God is perfectly safe and harmless. We choose to ignore the fact that even now, no man can ever see the naked, unveiled glory of God, and live. The church today has been *unlearning* that first and most important lesson of all – the holiness of God. And so *both* our "creatureliness" *and* our sin is underestimated, and much of the church's worship, while it pays lip service to the glory of God, is ultimately pre-occupied with ourselves. Our worship, though it may be sincere and well-intentioned, may also be wholly unacceptable to God precisely because we have ceased to take into account the true biblical understanding of the holiness of God.

Have *we* underestimated our "creatureliness" and our sin? Have *we* become insensitive to the deadly fire of God's holiness? Has our worship become, without us even being aware, preoccupied with self – with what I like, with what makes me feel good, with what gives me the chills and gets my heart pumping? The writer of Hebrews gives to the church of today this desperately needed exhortation:

- ✓ Hebrews 12:29 — Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, *for our God is a consuming fire*.

And yet, brothers and sisters, we may also worship God with gladness and joy (and even dancing!), for we know that His desire to dwell among us without us being consumed has now come to pass in Jesus Christ. We know that because of Jesus, the deadly fire of God's holiness has actually become to us "a wall of fire all around." We know that one day we will see Christ's glory with our own eyes, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth, and we will not die, but have everlasting, abundant, eternal life. Our God is a consuming fire. Let us never forget that it is *this* God, and no other, who *saves*, and *redeems*, and *leads*, and *shepherds* His people *in Jesus Christ*.