

An encounter with God

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, in 1961, the Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin went up into space, and when he returned, he allegedly reported that he looked when he was in space, but he didn't see God. Now, many in our Western culture will wonder whether God actually exists, and if he does, they reckon, well, God must be hiding because he's nowhere to be seen. When it comes to the existence of God, people ask. If there's a God, well, how do you know what he is like, and if he's there, then how do we relate to him? Well, Exodus chapter 3 and chapter 4 answer this for us, because here we read about an encounter between Moses and God, and it tells us who God is, it tells us what God is like, and it tells us how we relate to him. Last week, we began a new series looking at the book of Exodus, calling it the God who saves, and last week, we looked at chapters 1 and 2, and Exodus essentially is a book that reveals God to us, and it reveals God's way of salvation, and so last week, we saw how in chapter 1 and 2, the Hebrews, who were God's people, were a nation, family, who then became a nation in Egypt, but they were oppressed by Moses, sorry, they were oppressed by Pharaoh, they weren't oppressed by Moses. Moses was the one who was going to lead them out of their oppression and their slavery, but Moses was a baby. Pharaoh had ordered all the baby boys be killed, but Moses was remarkably rescued, and he was brought into Pharaoh's household, the royal palace, and he was, in a sense, the son of Pharaoh's daughter. And then as a man, after Moses grew up, he killed an Egyptian, and he fled to Egypt. He ended up in a place called Midian, married with children, and that's really where we pick up the story today at the beginning of chapter 3, where God reveals himself to Moses so that God might then put the next part of his plan into operation.

And so as we look at this text, what we see is that it tells us about God, it tells us about ourselves, and it tells us how we relate to God, how we can have an encounter with God. And so in chapters 3 and 4, we'll see three things this afternoon. We'll see a God revelation, a self-revelation, and a world revelation. So first of all, a God revelation. You notice, as Shona read the passage to us, that Moses isn't the main character here. God is. Notice who does all the talking, or the majority of the talking, in these two long chapters. It's God. And so it's not as if Moses was on a spiritual search trying to find God. Actually, at this stage in the narrative, Moses's life was at a bit of a dead end. Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness.

And we know from elsewhere that Moses was 80 years old at this point. And so he'd been in Midian for 40 years, and it seemed like he was just seeing out his days looking after some sheep. And that is when he encountered God through the burning bush. And God commissioned Moses to lead his people out of their slavery in Egypt. And so through this commissioning, God reveals himself to Moses.

But in doing so, God also reveals himself to humanity, to us. And so this encounter is crucial for understanding how people, like you, like me, relate to the God who made us. And so let's look at this God revelation. And there are seven parts that we'll go through quickly. So first of all, the presence of God. Verse 2, we read, there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. So the encounter starts with God's presence as fire. Now fire describes God's presence throughout the book of Exodus. And so when the people crossed the Red Sea, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of fire by night. And then before the Lord gave the law to his people, he descended on Mount Sinai in fire. Then again at the tabernacle later on in Exodus, the presence of the Lord over, the tabernacle was by fire. Why fire? Well, fire speaks of the all-consuming holiness of God, of God's presence. God is holy, which is why Moses couldn't come any closer to God, and why he had to take his sandals off, because the place where he was standing was holy ground. So God is holy. We've been singing, holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which means sinful people like you and like me cannot possibly enter into the presence of a holy God. And yet here is the holy God coming to Moses to speak to him.

And see what he says there in verse 6. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And at this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

[5 : 39] And so there's the presence of God. After the presence of God, we hear about the passion of God. Verse 7 to 10 of chapter 3. Notice that God calls the Israelites, my people. And he tells Moses that he has seen their misery, that he has heard their crying, and that he is concerned about their suffering. And this picks up the language at the end of Exodus chapter 2, if you were here last week, because God cares for his people.

And God is going to rescue them. And so we read verse 8. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So that's the passion of God for his people. Then we see the purpose of God. Chapter 3, verse 11 and 12. And this is an answer to Moses' first question. And God reveals why he is going to save his people. And we'll get to Moses in a while, but listen to what God says in verse 12. And God said, I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

So God is going to set his people free. Why? So that they can worship him on the very mountain that Moses was on at this point, which was Horeb, the mountain of God. And that's another name for Mount Sinai, where Israel would eventually reach. And we read about that in Exodus chapter 19. And so this was God's purpose, that they, his people, would worship him. Next, we hear about the person of God in chapter 3, verse 13 to 15. And this is where God reveals his name to Moses. Verse 13, Moses said to God, suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you.

And they ask me, what is his name? Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you. God says, I am who I am.

I am has sent me to you. And so the point is, God here is giving himself a name. But it's not a name that puts God in a box. I am who I am. I am who I am.

[8 : 19] Or I will be who I will be. God will not allow himself to be categorized or defined by anyone else. God alone says who he is. And so God reveals himself in this special way that essentially implies that God is eternal. God is self-existent. God is self-sufficient. God is all-powerful.

God depends on no one and nothing. God is who he is. And then he further defines himself to Moses in verse 15. God also said to Moses, say to the Israelites, 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. So he calls himself the Lord. And when we see the word Lord in our Bibles, all capital letters, it essentially is translating what is four Hebrew consonants. Y-H-W-H. And it's the name Yahweh, God's covenant name.

And it's emphasizing for us that God enters into a close relationship with his people, a covenant relationship with them. And so by God giving Moses his covenant name, God is saying to Moses that he wants to enter into a personal relationship with people. He wants to be known personally. We can relate to him. And then we have the promise of God, chapter 3, verse 16 to 22.

Let me read verse 17. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt and into the land. And he goes on. And so because God is the covenant God, then God will be faithful to his promise to deliver his people. God made a covenant with Abraham, you remember back in Genesis, and he promised to make his family into a nation. And God would bless them. And so Moses is being reminded that God will do what he has promised.

And so there's the power of God. Next, chapter 4, verse 1 to 9. And the power of God is seen in the signs and wonders that God gives Moses here. And there are three of them. First, Moses turns, Moses's staff turns into a snake and then back again. And then second, Moses's hand becomes leprous and it's healed again. And then thirdly, God told Moses he'd be able to take water from the Nile and then turn it into blood. And so in all of this, God is revealing to Moses that he is the powerful God.

[11 : 14] And then there's the plan of God, chapter 4, verse 10 to 17. Moses says he's not a good speaker, but God tells Moses that his brother Aaron is on his way. And so Aaron would help Moses in speaking to the people. So God has a plan for what he's doing. And his plan involves Moses along with Aaron, his brother. And Moses is the leader who will lead God's people out of their slavery in Egypt.

And so in this encounter between Moses and God, God does the majority of the speaking and God is revealing himself to Moses, who he is, what his name is, and what he is like.

And so in God's revelation of himself to Moses, we see the presence of God. God is holy. The passion of God, God is compassion. He loves people. The purpose of God, God is to be worshipped. The person of God, God is who he says he is. The promise of God, God keeps his covenant. The power of God, God is powerful. God is powerful. And the plan of God, God will save his people. He is the God who saves. And of course, this revelation is not just for Moses, it's for us too. Because you find these days that people quite like to define who they think God is. And that's why you hear people say things like, well, I like to think of God in this way. Or I don't like to think that God is like that.

I prefer to think God is like this. And what they're really saying is, well, I'll decide what God is like. And yet what we see here is God says, I am who I am. And yet rather than pay any attention to God's revelation about himself, many prefer to imagine a God that suits themselves.

But it's not just those outside the church who like to reimagine God and what he's like. Some who profess to be Christians reimagine God too. Either by denying aspects of God's character and nature or by rejecting clear biblical truth. And so you'll hear people say, well, God is love.

[13 : 36] And so God is never going to condemn anyone for their sin. God would never send anyone to hell. That's not the kind of God I believe in. Or surely God is not against me following my natural desires.

I mean, they're my desires and it's right, surely, to act on them. God wouldn't be against those. So can you see how easy it is to reimagine God? A God in our own image, a God in our own likeness, a God that suits us, a God that actually is like us, that thinks the same way that we think.

And yet the problem is that we're in danger of dismissing the true God, the God who has clearly revealed himself to us. And so the question is, well, do you know God for who he is? Do you know the God who has revealed himself to Moses and to us through his word, the Bible?

Or do you like to imagine God your own way? But the problem is, if you imagine God your way, that means you'll never have an encounter with the true and living God. You'll never meet him.

You'll never know him. He'll never transform your life because you're not going to the God who has revealed himself to you. Instead, you're going to a made-up God who is not the real God that we can know and encounter and be in a relationship with.

[15 : 07] Okay, so that's a God revelation. We see that here in these two chapters. Secondly, we see a self-revelation. So God reveals himself to Moses, but through the encounter, Moses, in essence, in what he says, reveals himself, what he is like. And it comes through his questions and his excuses. And so his first question there is, who am I? Verse 11.

But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Now, this is not an existential question. Moses knows who he is. It's more of a practical question about his ability to succeed. Because as a shepherd, he knows he could never go to the most powerful leader, probably in the world at the time, and tell him to let his slaves go. So Moses is well aware of his own inadequacy. And yet God responds to Moses by saying, I will be with you. And you notice it's a response that has got nothing to do with Moses, and it has everything to do with God, with who God is, and with what God is like. And of course, Moses isn't up to the task. Nobody ever is up to the task of what God calls them to. But God promises Moses he will be with him, promising his presence and also his power. And then Moses asks a second question. Essentially, he says, who are you? Chapter 3, verse 13.

Moses said to God, suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they ask me, what is his name? Then what shall I tell them? Now Moses didn't start asking this question in a good way. He said, suppose I go. As if there's a kind of bargaining with God, there's no suppose about it. He was either going to do what God had told him to do, or he would be disobeying God. And God had already told Moses who he was. You notice in chapter 3, verse 13.

6. God identified himself as the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet despite this, Moses still questions God. He felt he needed more in order to persuade people. Perhaps he thought that if he'd said to people he'd heard God's voice from a burning bush in the desert, they'd have thought that, well, he'd been out in the desert for a bit too long in the sunshine. So Moses knew he could never persuade the Israelites or the Egyptians by himself. And that's why he wanted the full weight of God's authority behind him. And so he asks God to reveal his name. Because by God revealing his name, God was also revealing his very self, the essence of who he is. Because the name of God represents the character and the nature of God. But this eventually leads Moses to ask another question. Thirdly, what if they do not believe me or listen to me? Chapter 4, verse 1.

Now, God had just told Moses that he would save his people. He also told Moses that the elders of Israel would listen to him. Chapter 3, verse 18. And God had also said he would perform wonders among the Egyptians. And yet despite all of this, it's as if Moses isn't really listening to God. He'd severely underestimated who God is. And God was calling Moses to this work. He'd given him enough evidence. And yet Moses wanted more. And so God gave Moses these powerful signs, three signs. But still Moses is in dialogue with God. And then Moses gives his excuse in chapter 4, verse 10. He says, I have never been eloquent. He's telling God. He's telling God. He's telling God. He's telling God. He's telling God.

[19 : 26] God, I don't have what it takes. And yet it's not Moses's speech that is the problem. It's his unwillingness. And that's why God rebukes him. Because since God gave humans their mouths, he assures Moses that he will help him speak and tell him what to say. And so notice how God answered all of Moses's questions.

And Moses is at the stage where he has exhausted all of his excuses. And that's when we discover what the real issue is. Fifthly, Moses says, chapter 4, verse 13, please send someone else. So you notice that from the beginning of our reading, chapter 3, verse 4, Moses says, here I am. And look at where we've got to. Please send someone else. And so we get to the very heart of the matter here. Moses didn't want to trust or obey God. And so Moses is revealing himself, what he is really like. Despite this powerful encounter with God, what does Moses want to do? He would rather wander around in the wilderness looking after his father-in-law's sheep. Instead of go to Egypt in obedience to God's call and lead God's flock, God's sheep, out of their slavery. And so we see where Moses's heart is at.

Now these chapters don't just reveal God to us. They also reveal ourselves. And so we need to take a look at ourselves and see where we are in relation to God. And so perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're here in church today. And the reason you're here is because you want to discover more about God. And that's great. That's the best place you could be to do that. So can you see how God revealed himself, not just to Moses, but see how God has revealed himself to us? Now Moses, of course, was unique. And God's revelation to Moses was unique. But it's also for us. God reveals himself here for humanity to discover what God is like. Because from here on, God continues to disclose himself throughout history, through the centuries, and we discover what he's like in his word. He reveals himself to us. And so it means, well, yeah, continue to ask your questions about God, continue to explore, continue to discover. But don't ever think that God is somehow playing some big cosmic game of hide and seek with us. As if God is hidden and our job is to try and find him. God is not hiding. God has revealed himself to us. And so God is present. And God is also personal, which means we can know him.

And so like Moses, if you're still looking and wondering if God is there and what he is like, and if you can relate to him in any meaningful way, well, like Moses, there comes a time when all the questions dry up, when all the objections have been answered, and when all the excuses have been exhausted. And there comes a time when you just need to pay attention to what God has revealed about himself and to listen to him, to listen to what he says about who he is. And so perhaps that is where you're at. And all the questions, all the excuses, all the objections have just become a smokescreen for avoiding God and what he demands of you. But it's not so much of an intellectual challenge when it comes to God, but it's more of a personal or a moral challenge. Because you know that doing what

God says will mean a radical change of life for you. And you just don't want that. It's too much. But this also has implications for us if we would call ourselves a Christian. Because we also know what God demands of us, and yet we can resist doing it. And so we need to trust and obey instead of doubt and delay. Because perhaps we need to repent of sinful behavior, but we're not doing it. Maybe we need to stop putting off a decision, and we need to make the decision. Perhaps we fear other people more than we fear God. And so we find excuses to simply avoid doing what we know God tells us to do.

[24 : 35] You see, when we truly encounter God and what he is like, then we discover more of what we're like. We cannot encounter God as he has revealed himself to us, and then never change.

The revelation of God in his word and in his world forces us to take a long, hard look at ourselves and who we are before him. And then act. And so we see a God revelation first. Secondly, a self-revelation.

And then thirdly, and finally, a world revelation. So here's a question. How do you know if you have had a genuine encounter with God? How do you know if you have met, encountered the God of the Bible?

Well, you know if you're prepared to go. To go out into the world for him. Because that's what happened to Moses after his encounter with God. He went out into the world. And so the next scene in this story, there's the big, long conversation between God and Moses. But then when you get to chapter 4, verse 18 to 31, the next scene describes Moses' return to Egypt. And four times God commanded Moses to go.

So chapter 3, verse 10, so now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh. Chapter 3, verse 16, go, assemble the elders of Israel. Chapter 4, verse 12. Chapter 4, verse 19, go back to Egypt. And Moses did.

[26 : 25] So we know he had a genuine, true encounter with God because he went. God was sending him, and so he had to go. And he did. After 80 years of life, he was prepared to return to Egypt.

to lead God's people out. He would fulfill God's commission to him. And so we see what he was to say in chapter 4, verse 22 and 23. Then say to Pharaoh, this is what the Lord says. Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, let my son go so that he may worship me. But you refuse to let him go, so I will kill your firstborn son. Now God's words here reveal to us the special relationship that God has with his people. They're not just one nation, the Hebrews or the Israelites, amongst many other nations. They are his firstborn son. And so they must be set free from their slavery in Egypt because they are to worship God. God wanted to rescue his firstborn son, which meant the death of Egypt's firstborn sons in the process. And this all anticipates the 10th plague, which we'll get to when God killed Egypt's firstborn. And that is what finally persuaded

Pharaoh to let God's people go. And so what is remarkable here is that God chooses Moses for this role. Moses. He was 80. But it's not about his age. He's the most reluctant servant of God that we meet because he had his objections, his questions, and his doubts. And so what's this telling us? Well, it's telling us that God often works with people who are like Moses. That God has a plan and God has a purpose and God has a person he wants to use in accomplishing his purpose and his plan. And God doesn't need you or me any more than he needed Moses. And yet he chooses to call us into his service so that he can send us so that he can send us out so that we go and serve him in this world.

Even if you're like Moses, who was 80, it doesn't matter because Moses isn't the hero of the story here. God is. And God is the one who does his work. And he chooses to do it through people like us.

And this is clear from the very strange incident we come across at the end of chapter 4. As Moses makes his way to Egypt, God said, go, and he's on his way. He's moving. But look what happens at the end, verse 24 to 26. At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him.

[29 : 34] But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. Surely you're a bridegroom of blood to me, she said. So the Lord let him alone. At that time, she said, bridegroom of blood, referring to circumcision. So what is unusual here is that God had rescued Moses, remember, as a baby in the river Nile. And then God had commissioned Moses as the one who would lead his people out of their slavery in Egypt. And here we read about God going to kill Moses. So what's this all about? Well, it's a difficult passage, but the point is that God takes his covenant relationship so seriously, which means that people should never be casual when it comes to their relationship with God. We must obey God in the same way that Moses had to obey God.

And so here's what I think is going on here. In God's covenant with Abraham, you remember the sign of the covenant was circumcision. And so God had commanded the sign to be given to Abraham and to his children. Since the covenant was between Abraham and his descendants for generations to come, all of the Israelites, all of Abraham's family had to be circumcised. Because circumcision was the sign, the visible sign that you were one of God's people. And yet it seems here that Moses hadn't even circumcised his own son, which was a huge offense and insult to God. Because God, you notice, only leaves Moses alone rather than kills him when Moses' wife circumcises his boy. And so Moses couldn't get away with such disobedience. He and all of his family needed to be counted amongst God's covenant people.

And so this is not just about Moses being sent to Egypt to save God's people. It's not just history.

This is part of God's salvation plan for the world, where God invites people like us into a relationship with him. And so we must obey him. That's why God later will give the law to his people.

And so when Moses was called by God to deliver Israel, his firstborn son, out of slavery to Egypt and then take them into the promised land, Moses was foreshadowing the Lord Jesus Christ, God's unique son, who came to deliver his people from slavery to sin and to take them to the ultimate promised land of heaven. And yet unlike Moses, who was reluctant and unwilling, Jesus came and he never said, send someone else. Jesus was the willing and obedient Savior, even though it meant his death on a cross. Because there was no other way, no other one who could save us.

[32 : 53] We needed a Savior who was truly human and also truly God. And that's why in the Gospels, Jesus said, I am. In fact, when Jesus debated with some Jews about his identity in John chapter 8, he said, Before Abraham was born, I am. Before Abraham was born, I am. And as soon as he said this, the people he was speaking to recognized that this was a claim to be God by Jesus, and they were right. And that's why they picked up stones to stone him. Because stoning was the punishment for blasphemy.

So Jesus took for himself the name that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. And do you know what that means? It means that we don't need to guess about God anymore.

We don't need to guess about who God is. We don't need to guess about what God is like. And we don't need to guess about how we can relate to God. So there's no need to doubt God's existence. There's no need to pontificate about what God is like.

And there's no need to think that God is just far too distant and impersonal for us to know. The Christian claim is that God has revealed himself to us in Jesus.

God said to Moses, I will be with you. In Jesus, God has come to us. Emmanuel, God with us.

[34 : 33] And so we can encounter God in Jesus Christ. God not only revealed himself at the burning bush, God has progressively disclosed himself to us until finally and fully revealing himself to us in Jesus.

So God entered into the world that he created. And he's shown himself to be not only the creator and the director of the play, but also the main character.

He's opened the curtain, as it were, and stepped onto center stage. Why did he do this? Well, it's because he is so holy.

And so he must wipe out all sin. And yet he is so loving. He is a covenant God who wants to be in relationship with his people. He's so loving that he has chosen to wipe out sin without wiping out us.

And it happens at the cross where Jesus died. And that's why Jesus is the savior that we need to bring us back to God. And so it's only when we turn from our sin and trust in Jesus that we truly encounter God.

[35 : 50] And we know we've encountered him. Because we'll go. We'll go out into this world for him. We'll go out and tell people the good news about Jesus.

So that they too can encounter the God who made them. And thus we're going out of thing.

And yet for the bias that they have thrown from us. And that we're getting to know the good news about the process. I'm no Arena He's authorized for him .