Lesson: Exodus 3:1-12; Time of Action: 1445 B.C.; Place of Action: Mt. Horeb (Sinai)

Golden Text: “Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:9-10).

I. INTRODUCTION. This week’s lesson brings us to the burning bush in the desert where God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egyptian bondage. As is typical of God’s dealings with human problems, He sought His leader in a most unlikely place. Having previously been exiled from Egypt and having spent forty years in the wilderness, Moses could not imagine himself as a leader, but the Lord had plans to use him for His glory and Israel’s good. God’s reassurance to Moses should encourage us when we are tempted to focus only on our inadequacies.
II. LESSON BACKGROUND. The book of Genesis ends with Jacob and his family coming to live with Joseph in Egypt (see Genesis 46:5-7). The time between Joseph and Moses was at least four hundred years (see Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6). However, at some point, the Egyptian pharaoh came to see the Hebrews as a threat and enslaved them (see Exodus 1:8-11). By the time of Moses’ birth, the number of Hebrew people had greatly increased. In an effort to diminish the population, the Egyptian pharaoh commanded the midwives to kill all baby boys at birth. However, they refused to do this because they feared God (see Exodus 1:15-21). During this difficult time, Moses was born. In an effort to protect him from Pharaoh’s murderous plan (see Exodus 1:22), his parents hid him for three months. When they couldn’t hide him any longer, Moses was placed in a waterproof basket and hidden among the reeds along the Nile River (see Exodus 2:1-4). It was here that little Moses was found by Pharaoh’s daughter and then raised as her adopted son. He enjoyed all the benefits of the palace (see Acts 7:22). Moses could have remained in Pharaoh’s court and possibly even ascended to the throne one day. But all that changed when he witnessed how cruelly his people were being treated and he chose to identify with his own oppressed people (see Hebrews 11:24-25). He even killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. This incident was made known to Pharaoh, who sought to have Moses killed; so he ran from Egypt and found refuge with the Midianites (see Exodus 2:11-15). In the land of Midian, Moses married the priest’s daughter Zipporah, raised a family, and gave himself to the life of a shepherd
(see Exodus 2:16-22). Exodus chapter 2 ends with the children of Israel crying out to the Lord because of their bondage and God heard their cries and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Exodus 2:23-25). Our lesson begins with Exodus chapter 3.

III. MOSES’ CIRCUMSTANCES (Exodus 3:1). Our first verse says “Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.” As Exodus chapter 3 opens, we are told that “Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian.” He was a shepherd in the land of Midian and had been one for the past forty years, since the time he fled from Egypt (see Acts 7:30). Note: Interestingly, the two periods of Moses’ life—forty years in the palace and forty years in the desert tending sheep—actually prepared him for the final forty years of his life as Israel’s deliverer (see Acts 7:23-30). In the same sense, our life experiences often prepare us for the Lord’s work. Remember, God only calls those who are doing something! Shepherding certainly wasn’t the best job a person could have, yet Moses was a busy Shepherd who was also faithful in that calling. Like Moses, believers need to be faithful with the smaller tasks God give us to do, and He will give us more responsibilities in the future (see
Sometime after reaching Midian, Moses married Zippora, the daughter of “Jethro…the priest of Midian.” The area known as “Midian” had no definite borders, but it apparently covered much of the Sinai Peninsula. The Midianites were descendents of the union between Abraham and Ketura (see Genesis 25:1-2), Abraham’s second wife. Thus, Moses actually married into the Abrahamic family. Now eighty years old, Moses no longer saw himself as a deliverer of slaves. Apparently, he was content to take care of the “flock of Jethro his father in law” and live in obscurity. While doing his job, Moses “led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.” The “backside of the desert” refers to the west side of “the desert.” Semitic people (descendants of Shem both Arabs and Jews) always considered the east as the forward direction. While leading his sheep on the west side of the desert, Moses “came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.” Mount “Horeb” is another name for Mount Sinai, and it is here called “the mountain of God” looking ahead to its later importance as the place where God would give the law to Israel (see Exodus 19:1-8; 20:1-17). **Note:** Although the location of Mount “Horeb” is uncertain, the site that tourists visit today is Jebel Musa which means “mountain of Moses,” but it is located south of the Sinai Peninsula. It appears that after coming to this mountain under Moses, the Israelites paid little attention to its location thereafter because there is only one other recorded visit to “Horeb” and that was by Elijah (see I Kings 19:8).
IV. MOSES AND THE DIVINE APPEARANCE (Exodus 3:2-6)

A. The burning bush gets Moses’ attention (Exodus 3:2-3).

1. (vs. 2). This verse says “And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” While Moses tended his flock, we are told that “the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.” In this case, “the angel of the Lord” was a manifestation of God Himself (see Exodus 3:4), or a theophany. This is an appearance of God or Jesus Christ (Christophany) in human or angelic form. He also appeared as an angel to Hagar (see Genesis 16:7, 13), Abraham (see Genesis 18:1; 19:1), Gideon (see Judges 6:11, 14), and Samson’s parents (see Judges 13:17-22). “Fire” has several connotations in Scripture and we can only speculate on the significance of the “flame of fire.” It may have a double significance. On one hand it may call attention to the refining furnace or affliction in which the Hebrews found themselves (see I Corinthians 3:13-15; I Peter 1:7). On the other hand, it may signify the fiery judgment a holy God visits on those who oppress His people (see Genesis 15:14; II Thessalonians 1:8-9). Whatever the exact significance of the
“flame of fire” is here, we do know that “fire” in Scripture often signifies the presence of God (see Exodus 13:21; 19:18; Daniel 10:6; Revelation 1:14; 4:5; Hebrews 12:29). However, what is clear is that this was a miracle calculated by God to get Moses’ attention. For Moses to have witnessed a bush burning in the desert would not necessarily have been an unusual event. I’m sure he had probably seen many bushes catch fire from the desert heat. However, the remarkable thing that drew Moses’ attention to this burning “bush” was that “the bush was not consumed” meaning that it was on fire but it wasn’t burning up. Of course, being curious, Moses decided to get a closer look as we shall see in the next verse.

2. (vs. 3). This verse says “And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” Indeed, Moses noticed the burning bush and said “I will now turn aside, and see this great sight.” Some have tried to explain this phenomenon in natural terms, for example, as the reflection of sunlight on red leaves or brilliant flowers on the bush. However, Moses had spent forty years in the desert so seeing a bush burning would not have been a “great sight.” What he saw was unique. While Moses observed the fire for some time, the bush did not burn up and this made him determined to find out “why the bush is not burnt.”

B. Moses’ solemn call (Exodus 3:4). This verse goes on to say “And when the Lord saw that he turned
aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.” The phrase “And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see” means that with Moses attracted to the unusual sight of an unconsumed burning “bush,” God now had his undivided attention. At this point “God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses.” The change from “the angel of the Lord” in verse 2 to “the Lord” here indicates that the two are the same Person. The “bush” was only significant because God spoke from within it. The voice speaking from the “bush” knew this shepherd by name. The voice called out “Moses, Moses.” Obviously, this was some divine being calling out to the now eighty-year-old shepherd of Midian. Who else could this be but God? Moses no doubt acknowledged this when he humbly answered like others before him: “Here am I” (see Genesis 22:1; 31:11; I Samuel 3:4; Isaiah 6:8). Note: A most important lesson that we can learn from this event is that God does not want to communicate with us only when we sit in church on Sunday or when we are in a spirit of prayer. God called Moses on an ordinary day amid the ordinary routine of caring for sheep. We must remember that God has used a variety of ways to communicate with His servants. Symbols in real life and visions were frequently used (see Genesis 28:12; 37:5-11; Daniel 1:17; 7:1-28; Hosea 1:1-11). However, the prophet Elijah heard God in a” still small voice” (see I Kings 19:12). The ultimate revelation of God came through His Son, Jesus Christ (see John 1:14; Colossians 1:15-19; Hebrews 1:1-3). Although God no longer appears to us visibly, He still speaks to us
through Scripture, circumstances, and other persons. The challenge for us is to always be alert and sensitive to God’s presence. We need to have David’s attitude when he said to God that he would direct his prayer to Him in the morning and then watch throughout the day for Him to respond (see Psalms 5:3).

C. Moses standing on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). This verse continues to say “And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” As Moses approached the bush to get a closer look, the voice spoke from the bush again saying to Moses “Draw not nigh hither.” In other words, the Lord commanded Moses not to come any closer to the bush. Then God commanded him to “put off thy shoes from off thy feet.” Later, Joshua was commanded to do the same thing when he stood before the Lord (see Joshua 5:15). Removing one’s shoes was a symbol of a servant’s humility before his master. Putting off one’s shoes in ancient times was like taking off one’s hat today. It was a token of respect and submission. God said that the reason Moses was to take off his shoes was because “the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” This is the first time the word “holy” appears in the Bible, and it means to be set apart from evil and common things, and set apart unto God. This “ground” where Moses stood was only “holy” because God was there. Before and after this time, it was only a normal spot in a barren part of the Sinai desert. This is a truth we should remember when we are tempted to
revere shrines and sites designated as “holy” places. Holiness on earth is found only where God dwells—in the church body and in individual believers (see I Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). **Note:** The terms consecration, dedication, sanctification and holiness come from the same Hebrew verb. Anything that is “holy” is removed from the realm of the common or everyday use, and moved to the realm of the sacred. The focus of the sacred realm is God Himself. The term “holy” which also means “to sanctify” becomes a technical religious term used of persons, places, times, and things that were considered sacred because they were associated with and consecrated or dedicated to God.

D. God’s identity revealed (Exodus 3:6). This verse says “Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.” The Lord now revealed His identity to Moses. He said “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Although the word “father” is used in the singular, it should be understood collectively, or in the plural to refer to all three of the patriarchs mentioned. “Abraham” was the patriarch with whom God made the first covenant promises (see Genesis 12:1-3; 15:7-21). “Isaac” and “Jacob” who were descendants of “Abraham” were also patriarchs who received the same promises God made to “Abraham” (see Genesis 26:2-5; 28:13-15). God’s identification of Himself
with the patriarchs was important because it reminded Moses that the covenant God had made with them was still in effect. In spite of Israel’s oppressed condition, the Lord remembered His commitments and would soon fulfill them with a display of power. **Note:** Even though Moses had been raised in the Egyptian palace, he was aware of his Hebrew ancestry and the promises God had made to His people. He was most likely taught this by his own natural mother who nursed him as an infant and may have continued to care for him as he grew to manhood (see Exodus 2:7-10). Recognizing that he was in the presence of the God of Israel, “Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.” Moses reacted to the presence of God by hiding his face just as Elijah later did (see I Kings 19:12-13). Of course we understand that no one has ever seen God’s essence or His glory (see John 1:18; I Timothy 6:16) knowing that it would mean death (see Exodus 33:20). However, on occasion, God has clothed Himself in some visible form as He did in this text in order to deliver a divine message.

V. MOSES AND THE DIVINE MESSAGE (Exodus 3:7-10)

A. Israel’s deliverance (Exodus 3:7-8).

1. (vs. 7). This verse says “And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are
in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows.” The Lord appeared to Moses to bring him a message of deliverance. Even though the people of Israel had suffered for many years at the hands of their cruel taskmasters, they were not forgotten by their God. He said to Moses “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows.” The human-like expressions “I have surely seen” and “have heard” indicate that God had taken a keen interest in what was happening to His chosen people. He knew the full extent of their sufferings at the hands of the Egyptians. Human terms are often used to describe what God does so we can better understand who He is. Ascribing human terms to God like seeing, hearing, looking or walking are what we call anthropomorphism. It’s interesting that God refers to the Israelites as “my people” indicating that the family that came from Jacob had now become a great nation (see Genesis 46:2-3, 26-27).

2. (vs. 8). God continued to say in this verse “And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” The Lord had determined to do something about the Israelites situation. First, He said “I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.” To “come down” meant that God would take a personal role in human affairs (see Genesis 11:5, 7; 18:21).
In this case, His role would be decisive and would result in Israel’s freedom. Second, the Lord had determined “to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.” The land to which God would bring them was “good” because it was “flowing with milk and honey.” This description marked the “land” as a herdsman’s paradise. There, their animals would thrive and produce “milk” abundantly and there they would find bees’ “honey” in the hollows of trees and the crevices of rocks. Although it was not necessarily cultivated, it was a “land” of plenty. To show that the “land” of Canaan was also “large,” the Lord named the peoples who inhabited it. God said that the land was occupied by “the Canaanites” which sometimes described all the peoples collectively, but here it probably refers to those in the northern part of the land. “The Hittites” were most likely immigrants to Canaan from the Hittite Empire of Asia Minor. “The Amorites” were people who inhabited the Judean hills and the territory east of the Jordan River. The term “Perizzites” mostly means “villagers” and refers to those who inhabited villages that had no walls. “The Hivites” lived, among other places, in central Canaan at Shechem and Gibeon, and “the Jebusites” were the original inhabitants of the area of Jebus or Jerusalem (see Judges 19:10-11). This is not the most complete list of Canaanite tribes since the Kenites, the Kenizites, the Kadmonites, the Rephaims and the Girgashites are not listed (see Genesis 15:19-21). All of these peoples inhabited the “large” land to which the Lord would take Israel. Note: This region was generally known as Canaan. Israel, Palestine, and Canaan are all names that refer to the same general
area, depending on the historical period being considered. The nations listed would be displaced by the Israelites once God responded to their cries and led them to Canaan (see Deuteronomy 7:1-2).

B. Moses’ assignment as Israel’s deliverer (Exodus 3:9-10).

1. (vs. 9). In this verse, the Lord continued to say “Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.” The Lord repeated His deep concern for His people in their present slavery (see Exodus 3:7). He said that “the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me.” Of course “the cry of the children of Israel” refers to their groaning under their taskmasters (see Exodus 2:23-24). Scripture does not say that they cried to God (although many probably did), or that He even came to their minds, but because of His covenant with their forefathers, God paid attention to their plight. In order to emphasize the fact that He was keenly aware of Israel’s troubles, The Lord added “and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.” The Lord made it very plain to Moses that He knew what was going on and that He was going to do something about it as we shall see in the next verse.

2. (vs. 10). In this verse God said “Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou
mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.” God’s message to Moses reached its climax when He said “Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.” While God would do all the deeds necessary to rescue them, He would do them through Moses. The words “I will send thee unto Pharaoh” mean that Moses would represent the Lord before “Pharaoh.” God also told Moses that His purpose for sending him to “Pharaoh” was so “that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.” God was calling Moses to do what He had promised Abraham that He would do (see Genesis 15:13-14).

VI. MOSES’ OBJECTION OF UNWORTHINESS (Exodus 3:11-12)

A. Moses’ reluctance to accept his assignment (Exodus 3:11). This verse says “And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” After hearing the assignment God had for him, Moses’ immediate response was “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” In other words, Moses was saying that he was not qualified to “go unto Pharaoh” and “bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt.”
It’s funny, but if the Lord had called Moses to do this forty years earlier when he was a prince in Egypt, he would have enthusiastically accepted it. At that time he had unwarranted self-confidence that he was Israel’s deliverer (see Acts 7:22-29). Now that he was actually given the commission, with his words “Who am I,” Moses had the opposite problem: he lacked self-confidence much like Gideon (see Judges 6:15). He was a simple shepherd and he doubted his fitness for the job. The credentials he once had as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter no longer meant anything. He was a shepherd, not a statesman. Surely, there had to be someone else better suited for this role. **Note:** It’s baffling to me that when God calls us to do something, oftentimes we hold back because we think that we know better than He does. But God knows who we are and what we can be. Moses only saw his inadequacy. But God saw his adequacy! As to his ability to appear before Pharaoh, Moses certainly knew the language and the customs of Pharaoh’s palace. In fact, he was probably the most qualified person available to appear before Pharaoh. He was also an Israelite, so he could represent them. He had been raised by Pharaoh’s daughter, so he knew the language well and the ways of the Egyptians. God knew all of this, but Moses never considered any of it. Are we guilty of the same thing when God calls?

**B. The Lord’s assurance (Exodus 3:12).** Our final verse says “And he said, Certainly I will be with thee;
and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.” God had an answer ready for Moses’ objection of inadequacy for the task, and it was two-fold. First God promised “Certainly I will be with thee.” It’s noteworthy that the Lord didn’t try to make Moses feel better about himself, because Moses was indeed inadequate for the task. Instead, He promised that His own presence and power would compensate for Moses’ weakness. God wanted to teach Moses the truth that Paul later learned through his “thorn,” that God’s strength was made perfect in his weakness (see II Corinthians 12:9-10). Second, the promise of God’s presence was accompanied with a sign as God said “and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.” The word “token” means a “sign” (see Genesis 9:12-13; Exodus 12:13; Mark 14:44; II Thessalonians 1:4-5). The “token” or sign that God would be with Moses was that Moses would lead the Israelites out of Egypt and they would “serve God upon this mountain” which was Mount Horeb or Sinai. It would be there that Israel would receive instructions on how to serve the Lord. In this case, the sign wasn’t meant to strengthen faith; it required faith. When Moses’ faith had triumphed, God would fulfill His word and bring Him and Israel back to this same spot where he was standing shoe-less (see Exodus 3:5). Moses’ responsibility included more than leading his people out of bondage. It also included leading them in worship of the true God. This realization led Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel had to go out and hold a feast to Him in the wilderness (see Exodus 5:1).
VII. Conclusion. The call of Moses teaches us that God does not always choose talented people who can do everything well. He calls people with flaws. When God calls a man or a woman, He enables that person to accomplish God’s mission (see Philippians 2:13). If someone else is needed to help, God will take care of that (see Exodus 4:10-16). For sure, we may never have a real burning bush experience, nor should we expect to have one. But while we shouldn’t expect such a dramatic call as some others have received, we can know that God has spoken to us in His Word and that He has interacted with us. Whatever God calls us to do, we can rest assured that His promise to us is the same as it was to Moses: “I will be with thee” (see Exodus 3:12).

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