

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: I've told you before the story written by H. G. Wells about an unctuous Episcopalian bishop. He had cultivated a religious tone of voice and stock religious answers when people came to him with their troubles. "Have you prayed about it?" he'd ask in just the right way.

He didn't pray much himself; too sophisticated. He was a professional, after all. But one day life went south for him and he found himself overwhelmed, so he decided to try his own advice. It was Saturday afternoon when he went to the front of the cathedral and knelt on the crimson rug. Then he folded his hands in prayer, thinking how childish he looked. "O God," he prayed. And suddenly there was a crisp, businesslike voice: "Well, what is it?"

The next day when worshippers came to the Sunday services, they found the bishop sprawled face down on the crimson carpet and when they turned him over, they discovered he was dead, lines of horror etched upon his face. [#2547; PT.com, Haddon Robinson]

- B. **Exodus 2** ends, *"The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."* That is good news indeed but no one is all of Israel had ever met God. Moses was about to. Moses, who as a condemned Hebrew baby was rescued and raised by Pharaoh's own daughter; Moses, who as a 40-year-old aristocrat killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave, and then ran for his life to the far-off reaches of Midian; Moses, who spent the next 40 years of his life herding sheep, "a foreigner among foreigners," far from both the Egyptians who raised him and the Israelites who were his people. That Moses was about to meet God.

- C. I doubt anyone is ever prepared to actually meet God. We seem pretty comfortable with the idea but if God actually replied, “*Well, what is it?*” we, too, might be found dead from shock. Just ask Moses. **Ex. 3:1-6...**
- D. Do you know who you are meeting when you step into the presence of the holy God? We need to know but you can see the problem:

**I. YOU ARE MEETING THE HOLY GOD WHO THREATENS YOUR SAFETY (3:1-6)**

The stage for this drama is stark and isolated: “*the far side of the wilderness... Horeb, the mountain of God.*” Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai. There’s debate about which mountain in that region is Horeb/Sinai, but whichever it is, the region is isolated and foreboding and virtually uninhabited. You might call it *godforsaken* if you didn’t know better. This is the mountain to which Israel would return and receive God’s laws and pattern of worship. But that day it seemed deserted.

- A. **V.2a**, “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.” It quickly becomes obvious in the dialogue that follows that the *angel* of the LORD *is* the LORD himself, for it is the LORD who speaks. The strange fire is what draws us for a closer look. Here is a fire that doesn’t consume the bush but that *does* threaten the life of Moses. How can that be? Here is a fire that requires no fuel and leaves no ash, a fire with the voice of God, a fire dangerous not because of its heat but its holiness.

**1. When God visits earth he often wears a cloak of fire.**

On one hand, God’s holy fire portends judgment as it did for Sodom and Gomorrah and it does with hell. On the other hand it is the outward evidence of God’s glory and presence, as with the pillar of fire that guarded and guided Israel, and the flames of fire that appeared over the heads of Jesus’ followers on the day the Holy Spirit ignited the church with God’s presence.

2. Fire vividly demonstrates that God's holiness is not just a characteristic, a label. Look into a fire. It is active. It *radiates*. It is an active force. **God's holiness radiates power and purity, affecting and altering all that is around him.** God's holiness illumines heaven and ignites hell. God's holiness is infinitely beautiful yet any sinner in his right mind would hide his eyes.
  3. Why do you think that the bush was unscathed but Moses was in danger? God said, "*The place where you are standing is holy ground.*" The word *holy* means separate, set apart. God is set apart from us by his divine qualities like omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. **But what makes God's holiness dangerous to us is his moral purity.** It is as though we are clothed in oily rags and if we come too near the incendiary holiness of God we will go up in flames. *Don't come any closer! Take off your shoes! This is no place to track in the world's muck.* Here you need protection. Here you are not safe.
- B. **V.4...** There wasn't anyone else around. God could have just begun talking and Moses would have listened. So why call him by name... twice? Illus.: I didn't belong in the first seminary classes I took. I'd missed the part about prerequisites and I was way out of my depth. Our professor, Dr. John Gerstner, was an imposing and gruff man. It was his custom to look down his attendance sheet and pick a name when he had a question to ask. "*Mr. Carlson, what is supralapsarianism?*" **I did not want him to speak my name.** I think it must have been terrifying when the holy God called Moses' name out of the fire. You have the feeling that when God calls you out by name it is as if your whole life passes before his eyes. He knew everything about Moses and he knows everything about you and me. Every personal thing. Someone who knows everything about me and who is also perfectly righteous is not safe.

Moses said, “*Here I am.*” What else could he say?! But when you say to God, “*Here I am,*” well, nothing will ever be the same again. You are no longer your own. You heard what God said in v.10, “*So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.*” But that’s next Sunday’s sermon.

- C. **V.6a...** This tells us that our holy God has a history among us, but much more than that. Once, Jesus was confronted by the Sadducees, who didn’t believe in life after death. Jesus pointed out that God says here, “*I am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” He leaned on that present tense verb ‘*am*’ and said, “*He is not the God of the dead but of the living.*” Moses got that immediately. The God who spoke his loving covenant to Abraham some 500 years before was now speaking to him. He was meeting the God who always is! At 80 he met the eternal God.

What’s more, this is the God who has anchored all we believe and all we hope for. Moses had rejected the pleasures of Egypt to identify with God’s people Israel. And now the God who had given the aged Abraham and Sarah a son of promise, the God who had preserved Jacob and his sons in Egypt, the God who had given hope to Moses’ own father, Amram, when Pharaoh set out to kill the Hebrew baby boys, this same covenant-making God spoke to Moses. And when he did, Moses hid his face in fear!

SUMMARY: We may not see the flames nor hear the voice but this is the God whom we all meet sooner or later. The only true God. The God who is a consuming fire. He is not safe. Not in the least! *Unless* all our combustible sin could be removed.

Proverbs says, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.*” That’s what Moses just experienced—the fear of the LORD. But there is more to God’s holiness: **vv.7-10...** Sometimes people speak ignorantly about the ‘vengeful God of the Old Testament. But this, too, is the holiness of God. **The same holy**

God who warned Moses to come no closer also said to Israel, ***“I have seen the misery of my people... so I have come down to rescue them.”*** I asked you earlier, do you know who you are meeting when you step into the presence of the holy God? And we have seen that we are meeting the God who threatens our safety. But also...

**II. YOU ARE MEETING THE HOLY GOD WHO RESCUES THOSE WHO CRY OUT TO HIM (3:7-10)**

**It is a great paradox that our holy God, from whom we must keep a safe distance, bends to us in our misery with sympathy and salvation.**

- A. *“I have seen the misery... I have heard them crying out...I am concerned about their suffering.”* Of all that is beautiful in God’s holiness, this is the most precious. God is as distinct from us in this mercy as he is in judgment.
- B. At the heart of Israel’s misery was their bondage. They were slaves and cruelly treated. Theirs was not only hardship but humiliation; not only weakness but slave drivers who hated and beat them. Israel’s bondage in Egypt has become the icon of all human bondage. It was the biblical touchpoint for the American slaves, for Jews facing the Holocaust, and for oppressed people everywhere who know this Bible story. God cares about those who are enslaved and oppressed and he expects us to care, too. **But there is no oppression so hard, no chain so strong, as the sin that controls our lives and brings our inevitable, helpless death.** No one can create such misery as we have created for ourselves. There is no task master so harsh as Satan. And there is no hopelessness like facing death alone.
- C. And it is even to that deepest of human bondage that God says, “I have seen the misery of my people... so I have come down to rescue them.” Here in Exodus, when God comes down he comes like juggernaut crushing Egypt. When it was done, all Israel would sing, *“Your right hand, LORD,*

*shattered the enemy.*” **But to save us from our sin and Satan, from death and judgment, is a far harder thing, even for Almighty God, than saving Israel from Egypt.**

When God the Son came down to save us it was like this: **Phil 2:6-8...** *“I have seen the misery of my people... so I have come down to rescue them.”*

I was particularly struck this week with the promise that God not only will *forgive* my sin but break the power it has over me. That is harder. Habits can become like heavy iron manacles binding our wills. Forgiveness is just the first step of God’s promised freedom. We can call out to God for full freedom and he promises to rescue us.

- D. **Ex 3:8...** I love that turn of the phrase: *“I have come down... to bring them up out of that land.”* Our holy God is not only our Great Emancipator; he is also our Father who longs to bring us home he has prepared for us.

These Israelites knew virtually nothing about their homeland. None of them had ever seen it. They couldn’t even imagine it. But God tells Moses it is *“a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”* The land would be so good for their flocks it would be as if milk flowed in the rivers; the land so abundant it would be as if sweet honey could be drawn up in buckets from its wells.

It is unsettling to read the rest of v.8 where God promises to give Israel the land of these various nations. What we can barely grasp is just how wicked those nations had become. God told Abraham, way back in **Gen 15:16** that Israel would wait in Egypt so long, *“for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”* God doesn’t just take people’s homes from them. Do you remember just how perverse Sodom and Gomorrah had become before God destroyed them? It is sickening to read. We would be much quicker to *“call down fire”* on wickedness than God is but when sin *reaches its full measure*, as it will at the end of the age, our holy God will

destroy the wicked. Then that good and spacious land, which has been given over to false gods and ungodly behavior, will be reclaimed and given to the people of God as the new heavens and earth.

## Conclusion

We need to know what God is really like. People will say, “*The God I believe in is such and so.*” But God is not molded around our preferences. As Moses will hear next from the holy Voice in the fire, “*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.*” We need to learn that God’s presence is always holy ground, that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of the God-blessed life, and that God comes down to rescue those who cry out to him. Faith in Jesus Christ is what brings us safely into God’s presence and Jesus Christ is how the holy God comes down to rescue us and bring us up into that good land that awaits us. Have you put your faith in Jesus as God’s merciful Savior? Jesus alone opens the door for you to come safely to God.

Illus.: I’m sure that some of you have been thinking of that classic exchange in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the children first hear about Aslan and learn that he is a lion, not a man. Susan asks, “*Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.*”

“*That you will, dearie, and no mistake,*” said Mrs. Beaver, “*if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.*”

“*Then he isn’t safe,*” said Lucy.

“*Safe?*” said Mr. Beaver. “*Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king I tell you.*” [pp.75,76]