

Exod 03-02-23b

We're ready now to resume our study in Exodus chapter 4. God, at the end of Exodus chapter 3, began giving Moses an extended set of instructions, what he would say to the elders of Israel, what he would say to Pharaoh, and exactly what their response and reaction would be. Now it would be convenient for us, if in our challenges, in our walk through life, if God would appear to us the day before, or the week before, or a few hours before, and say, now this is what you will say, and this is how the people will react. We don't really have that luxury, and sometimes we're tempted to not identify with Moses, because God has not appeared to us in a burning bush, and giving us supernatural signs of confirmation, and a clear statement of what is about to happen.

But, if you stop and think about it, I'm not sure that's really true. Remember in our first session this morning, we talked about the fact that God has recorded his wonders and his memorial name for our benefit, and he has told us the way that people will respond. Jesus said, the ones who hate me are going to hate you.

The ones who receive me are going to receive you. In this world you will have tribulation. Be of good cheer.

Look for justice. Look for mercy. Wait patiently for the Lord.

Cultivate humility. Concentrate on your faith, your hope, and your love. And really, those general instructions apply to every situation that we encounter.

We think, well now, I don't know, I've got a pretty severe test going on at my employment, or in my family, or in my household, or my interpersonal relations, or within my own mental attitude, I've had some severe doubts, or some severe questions, or I've met a challenge that doesn't really comport with my past experience, and I've really got a cloud of uncertainty about me. How do we find our way out of the fog? Well, you think about the components of our thinking. You think about values, and goals, and priorities.

We start with what we know. Bob Thieme, years ago, began talking about rationales, ways to think yourself out of tests and problems. And, of course, in his unique way, he talked about the plan of God rationale, and the character of God rationale.

But it's really just a different way of saying the same thing, that when we find ourselves in times of trial, we focus on the word of God. How do we know what the plan of God is, or the character of God is? We look at his mighty works. We look at what he has said, and what he has done in the pages of scripture.

And you can call it a rationale. You can call it the faith arrest technique. Call it what you will.

We, as believers, have to look to the rock for our strength. We have to look to the word of God,

and the spirit of God, when we need strength. There is no other ground on which we can stand.

There is no other plea, as the hymn says. On Christ, the solid rock, I stand. Well, how do we plant our feet on that solid rock? What is God encouraging the Hebrews to do here? The Israelites have not seen God in several hundred years.

Many generations have gone by. Four full generations have gone by. And those were long generations in those days, when people lived to be into their early hundreds.

And no one has heard the voice of God. No one has seen a vision, or Jacob's ladder. No one has seen the appearance of God with two companions in Hebron, or in Sodom.

It is unheard of and unknown. This is a great step of faith for these abject, miserable, oppressed, humbled people to believe that a God they have never heard, and a God they have never seen, that exists only on the strength of His reputation, and the wonders that are told of in days gone by, that He can deliver in the present, and in their concrete circumstance, just as today. God doesn't speak in visions, and send angels, and do supernatural works in our age, of the kind that He did in the Bible.

And we find ourselves, much as the Hebrew slaves, being asked to believe in the God of our fathers, in the God that is spoken of in the Bible. We say, well, I don't see anything in the Bible about the modern day, with electricity, and cars, and industrial, technological, electronic age in which we live. I don't find God in the Bible to be addressing Himself to the kinds of problems we face today.

Well, in the Hebrews' day, they had no precedent for an entire people, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, being delivered from the cruel oppression of the most powerful nation on earth. They were called to have faith, delivering faith, faith that laid claim to the promises of God, and laid claim to the reputation and the name of God that was known to them from the past. We have the same call today.

And we have the same range of responses. Some in Israel believed, some did not. Some believed to an extent, up to a point, and then fell away.

You have a lot of people believing enough to splash the blood on the door posts. You don't have as many willing to go into the land when they first approach the Jordan, and the spies go in and bring back the huge clusters of grapes, and talk about the giants in whose sight we are as grasshoppers. The problems are too great.

The concrete circumstances of actually doing what God says, the consequences are too severe. It's daunting. It's overwhelming.

I can't face it. Let's turn around and do something else. So, we have the same range of responses available to us.

Is the challenge too daunting? Which is another way of asking the biblical question, is anything too hard for the Lord? With man, many such things are impossible, but with God, all things are possible. Do we believe that? Is that a part of our understanding of God's reputation? God tells Moses what to do, what to say, tells him that there will be a response among the people, but that Pharaoh will reject the request. Well, you think about this.

You come before Pharaoh, and he's unhappy, and rejects your request. He's the most powerful man in the land. He can do with you what he wills.

If he hears this idea, and decides that you're a rabble rouser, and that you're going to take away the workforce in Egypt, what's to stop him from saying, Guards! Conduct these men to the prison. They like to talk about the God of their fathers. Let them experience the prison of their father Joseph.

We send them in there, and we'll execute them like we did the, you know, you had the baker and the butler. One of them lived, and one of them died. Pharaoh has absolute power of life and death.

He doesn't have to convene a court, no lawyers. So Moses is walking into, from a human point of view, considerable danger, life-threatening danger, to go and speak these words. Imagine going into Saddam Hussein and saying, I'd like to lead the Kurds out of northern Iraq.

We want to go across the border into Turkey. What do you think the response would be, and how do you think the person who spoke those words would be treated? Well, this is basically what Moses is facing. I will stretch out my hand, he says in 320 of Exodus.

I will strike Egypt with all my wonders, which I will do in its midst. Let me ask you this. In all of the history that Moses and the people of Israel could have known up to this point, has God ever stretched out his hand and stricken an entire nation with wonders? There is one case.

What was the dream of Pharaoh that Joseph interpreted? There will be seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. God predicted that. God orchestrated it.

God brought it about. God blighted the entire land of Egypt and the surrounding regions, evidently even up in Canaan with famine. But God also provided food and sustenance for Egypt and for Moses' forebears, Jacob and his sons, through Joseph.

There was a deliverer that had been pre-positioned by God before the calamity came. In the same way, calamity is being predicted for Egypt, a much greater calamity than the first. But this also gives the Egyptians an opportunity to hear and respond and all of the other mixed nationalities that live in Egypt because this is known.

The Pharaoh knows not Joseph personally, but the stories of the days of Joseph are still known. The famine that was in the land, the administration and the deliverance that came through the God of the Hebrews, the God of Jacob, this is known. And so not only the Israelites, but also the

rest of the population in Egypt has the chance to respond.

When he starts talking about God, this is not a new unknown deity. We saw a special on Moses that tried to say that Moses sort of invented monotheism. He kind of cooked it up and that polytheism was the order of the day and it was a new thing.

It was not a new thing in Moses' day. It was a new thing in Abraham's day to the people and the cultures surrounding him. It was a new thing in the days of Jacob when they came down to Egypt.

But the monotheism, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not new in Egypt. He's known. He has a history.

There was 14 years to learn about the God of Israel and beyond. The bones of Joseph still sit there on the surface of the ground, visible to all of the population that comes into the capital city. And they see that.

And they say, who is that? Why is he not buried? Why is he not in a pyramid or in a crypt somewhere? And people tell the story. Well, that's the Hebrew Vizier who delivered us from the famine, who worshipped that God of his fathers. I will stretch out my hand.

I will strike Egypt with all my wonders, which I will do in its midst. And after that, Pharaoh will let you go. I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.

When you go out, they will not go empty-handed. It will be very interesting. We'll return to that particular statement down the road to find out what is done with that plunder.

Was this just to enrich the Hebrews and give them a nice little nest egg to start their new life with? It has a purpose. That plunder is going to be used for something specific. So now chapter 4, Moses answered, suppose they will not believe me, listen to my voice.

Suppose they say the Lord has not appeared to you. Well, we kind of read between the lines here and wonder if Moses is not as ready to receive confirmation as the theoretical people who are going to ask this question. Lord, how do I know it's you? How do I know that it's you giving me this commission? Well, there is a theme that runs through much of the Bible that has much this same tone.

God comes to someone and commissions them, calls them, and they say, but Lord, how do I know it's you? How do I know this is going to work? Can you give me a sign? For example, you think of the story of Gideon over in Judges. In fact, turn with me over to the book of Judges in chapter 6, beginning at verse 11. The Midianites, the same tribe, the same people group from which Moses is going to emerge to go back to Egypt.

But remember the Midianites were kind of like the nomads of the desert and they were not a united people with borders and a single government. They were groups of nomadic peoples

such as the Bedouin. If you say, well, the Bedouin have come and attacked.

Well, is that all the Bedouin? Were they all united and they all agreed? Well, they are a collection of clans that may have the same origin, the same language, and the same lifestyle, but they are not a cohesive body. So, these Midianites are not necessarily descendants of Jethro. There are Midianites that encounter Moses and the people a little bit later here in Exodus.

And we say, well, now why is God upset with the Midianites when Jethro seemed like such a godly man? Well, there are Midianites and there are Midianites. Here you have some Midianites oppressing Israel. You can see the first ten verses there.

Now, verse 11, the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth tree, which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress in order to hide it from the Midians. Now, when we say the winepress, you have to know a little bit about winepresses. We've talked before about the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives.

And it's a giant cave there. And there are sockets in the wall and there are all kinds of stone implements inside for pressing olive oil. And a winepress or an olive press could be in a cave or inside a building.

You had to have walls where you could put beans across and secure weights and have vats to catch the wine or the oil, have large stones where you could put these things and use the huge weight to press out whatever it is you want to press out. So this is a structure. And by going inside, and you can imagine if you've ever done any kind of really dusty work, you want to thresh outdoors so that the wind will pick up the chaff and carry it downwind.

The dust in the chaff blows away, leaving the edible grains of wheat. Well, you can't do this outdoors because the clouds of chaff and dust call attention to you and bring down the Midianites. So Gideon is doing an outdoor job indoors.

And what an awful mess this is. It's hot and prickly and there's no air movement in there. And he's threshing this, just trying to kind of throw.

You can do this by throwing the grain sort of from one side to the other. The lighter fluff and chaff will not travel as far as the grain. And by pitching it clear across, you kind of end up with grain around the edges and chaff in the middle.

But it's hot, dusty, almost intolerable work. But Gideon is doing it to hide it from the Midianites. And so the angel came and sat under an oak tree.

So this has probably got an open side, kind of like a lean-to or a barn with one big open door to get some air in there. And there's a tree outside this barn, we'll call it. And so the angel, he doesn't go walking into the dusty building.

He comes along and then he sits down under the tree, under this big oak tree, terebinth tree. And so pretty soon Gideon sees him. He looks out the door, he's wiping his brow, he's all covered in chaff and wheat dust and he's grumbling under his breath because of the conditions.

He looks out and he sees this man, calm, cool and collected, under the tree. And when he sees him, the man says, the Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor. Well, this has a great strand of irony in it because this man of valor is cowering inside the barn trying to thrash a little bit of wheat so he'll have something to eat, hiding from the Midianites.

And he says, you're a mighty man of valor. Do you ever feel this way as a believer when you look at the situation, the circumstances, what you're trying to do and the word of God says, be strong and have a good courage, be not afraid, be faithful, endure, look at the inheritance, faith, hope and love, narrow road, straight gate. He who endures to the end will be delivered and all this.

And then you look at yourself and you feel like, oh yes, mighty man of valor. And you feel like you're in the barn trying to thrash just a little bit of wheat and just get by. You feel like there's a big gulf between what the word of God pictures us as being and what we feel like we actually are ourselves.

Well, this is Gideon. And so he says, the Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor. And so the mighty man of valor kind of wipes the dust off himself and comes out and he says, oh my Lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Now of course, I don't know if we can actually relate to this or not.

If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his miracles which our fathers told us about? Saying, did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. Then the Lord turned to him and said, go in this might of yours, go in your great strength, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you? God says, well, you're complaining about the problem of the Midianites? Gather up your strength and go.

And they'll be delivered. So the Lord turned to him and said, go in this might of yours. So he said to him, oh my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I'm the least in my father's house.

Which tribe, if you're numbering the tribes of Israel, what number of tribes is Manasseh? You have the two half-tribes of Joseph, right? He's son number 11. So you have the tribe of Benjamin and you have Ephraim and Manasseh. Remember, there was the eldest and the younger and Jacob switched his hands.

So Manasseh is like number 12 out of 13. And he says, and in the tribe of Manasseh, the half-tribe in Israel, number 12 tribe out of 13, my clan is the weakest, I'm the least in my father's

house. The Lord said to him, surely I will be with you and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.

It won't be any different than mano a mano, one on one. It's not any different defeating all the Midianites as if you went out to just defeat one man. But what is the key to the promise? What does he tell him that is going to make all the difference? I will be with you.

You know how you say that in Hebrew? Yeh, yeh. I am with you. I will be, bakah, with you.

Whenever God promises and says, I will be with you, He says, I will be. And He's saying His name. His very name is, I am.

I am with you. I am here. I am involved.

I am engaged in human history. I am engaged in the forward progress of your life. And so Gideon girded up his loins and went forth, and behold, there was a great slaughter of the Midianites.

Right? Well, verse 17 says, If I found favor in your sight, show me a sign that it is you who talk with me. You wonder, when's the last time Gideon read Exodus? Because he's following in the well-worn tracks of Moses here. He says, Do not depart, I pray, until I come to you.

He goes and makes a meal. Prepares a goat, unleavened bread, and some broth. Brings it all under the tree, that the angel of the Lord has not moved from under the tree.

Then verse 20, The angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened bread, and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth. Lay them on the rock, pour out the broth. Verse 21, The angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread, and fire rose out of the rock, and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread.

And the angel of the Lord departed out of his sight. You get the idea that there was a great flash of flame, and cloud of smoke, when Gideon recovered his sight, and looked, the top of the rock is gone, the meal is gone, and so is the angel of the Lord. So then Gideon girded up his loins, and went forth in great strength, and defeated the Midianites, right? Well, Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord, that he saw it face to face, he built an altar, but then in verse 25, that same night the Lord said to him, Take your father's young bull, and go cut down the wooden image, build an altar, and he does that.

And, you get all the way down to verse 36, Gideon says to God, Well I've done this thing with the bull, and that worked out okay, but if you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor, if there is dew on the fleece only, and it's dry on all the ground, I'll know you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said. And it was so. Got up the next morning, squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.

Gideon said to God, Do not be angry with me, let me speak just once more, let me test with the fleece, let it now be dry on the fleece, let the ground be wet. God did so that night, it was dry on the fleece, but there was dew on all the ground. So, what's the point here? Gideon needs some assurance, that what he's doing is from God.

And in the same way that Moses gets these signs with the staff and with the leper's hand, Gideon gets these two signs of the wet and dry fleece. We say, well, I wish God would do that for me. I wish as I set a course and try to maintain some objectives that God would confirm with a supernatural sign that I'm on the right track.

What is the difference between then and now? Aside from the dispensations and so on, how much Bible did Gideon have? He didn't have any, except what he could remember. And in the days of the judges, where there were no prophets functioning yet, there was no frequent vision, in the days of the judges, how much of the word of God was available to a believer who didn't want to be faithful? It was very little. God had to fill in the gap by making a personal appearance and granting these requests and providing a basis for faith with people.

How much of a Bible do we have now? How many of God's mighty wonders have been recorded for our benefit? We've got a record of some 4,000 years of God's dealing with mankind in this book. This book spans 4,000 years of human history from Adam through Christ and the apostles. Sixty-six books set down for us over 1,500 years of writing.

God should not need to come to us with a confirming sign. We have examples from all of these individuals like Jacob, like Joseph, like Moses, like Gideon, and like many others. And with this available to us, it is simply a matter of faith.

It is no more difficult... Now, this may be a surprising statement. It is no more difficult to believe a sign that was given to someone in the Word of God that we read about and hear about than it is to believe a sign that you might perceive with your eyes or with your ears or that you might reach out and touch. Remember Doubting Thomas? I will not believe what you tell me, you other disciples that say He is risen.

I want to see the nail prints. I want to stick my finger in the hole in His side. And Jesus appeared and said, Thomas, come on up.

That's what it takes. Place your finger in my side. And he fell at His feet and said, Lord, I believe.

And Jesus said, You believe based on what you have seen. Blessed are those who not having seen yet believe. Your senses can fool you.

You can say, Well, I wonder if I really saw what I saw or if I was stressed out and my imagination ran away with me. In the same way that people who did see miraculous signs, who saw the dead raised to life, the lepers cleansed, the blind given their sight, the deaf given their hearing, the lame able to walk, the myriad healings that Jesus performed in Israel 2,000 years ago, thousands and thousands and thousands of people witnessed those miracles and did not

believe. The Israelites saw the plagues and saw the waters of the Red Sea part and saw God's provision of manna on a daily basis.

Every morning was a miracle when they walked out their tent and saw the manna on the ground. And yet they fell in the wilderness despite these daily signs, despite these great wonders that they had beheld. The cloud and the fire on Mount Sinai, the glowing face of Moses was not enough to sustain their faith across the Jordan River into the land of promise.

It is not the object of faith that is lacking. It is the subject. It's the one exercising faith that makes the choice.

It isn't that God hasn't given us enough to believe. It's that we have not chosen enough to believe what we've been given. Remember in the parable in Luke 16 of the rich man and Lazarus and the rich man is saying, send Lazarus to my brothers so that they will not come to this place.

And Abraham replies and says, they have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. If they will not heed Moses and the prophets, neither will they heed one that has been raised from the dead.

We don't need a burning bush. We don't need a rod into a serpent and back again. We don't need the hand leprous and whole again.

We don't need the water turned to blood. We don't need all of the rest of the plagues. We don't need to see the Red Sea part.

It's in the word of God. And this is just as sure a testimony as our own human vision, our human hearing, our human sense of touch. For the word of God to say it is all the same as having seen it.

And the question is not, is there enough evidence to believe? This special about Moses went on to say that they've done archaeology out in the desert and they find no evidence of people that numerous dwelling in the desert. There ought to be evidence. There ought to be signs.

And of course, there's been very little excavation out in that region because it was interrupted by warfare time and again. And they have found, especially up north, the traditional site of Mount Sinai is down in a peninsula. And we're going to see in a little bit why that is probably not the mountain of God.

The mountain of God is clearly somewhere central to a traveling route between Midian and Egypt because Moses is going to pass back by that mountain on his way to Egypt and Aaron is going to meet him there at the mountain. Why would he go all the way down to the tip of the peninsula to meet Aaron? Why would God send Aaron all the way down there? It should be more or less on a straight line between the region where the Midianites sojourn and Egypt. And if you look at a map and you see that V-shaped water that defines the Sinai Peninsula, look at

the right-hand section of the V and go to the top.

And when you reach that section of that gulf, travel due west and there is a mountain there. It is a high mountain. It is considered to be a holy mountain.

It has been for hundreds and thousands of years. And there are numerous evidences of dwelling at the foot of that mountain. There are rings of rocks that would have helped to surround and strong back tents.

There are altars of worship. There are twelve standing pillars arranged in two groups of six, which is something the Bible describes Moses having done at the foot of Mount Sinai. And so it is also on a direct line between the area of the Midianites and Egypt.

It would be a very good rendezvous point for someone coming from Egypt and someone coming from Midian to meet. It would also be a good point for the Israelites to pass again as they leave Egypt and head east and then north to go to Palestine without going by the way of the sea. Anyway, the archaeological evidence, whether or not it is present, doesn't change the fact that we have a requirement to believe what the Word of God says.

That is the evidence. That is the testimony. Those are the wondrous works passed down to us by the fathers.

It is not optional. It's not kind of nice-to-know information. It is must-know.

It is essential. These are our miracles. These are our testimonies.

These are the wondrous works of God that have been written down to sustain our faith and our hope. If we say, well, I don't feel the presence of God and the power of God, and I'm struggling, where is the power? It is in recalling to mind the truth of God's action. If you say, well, I would really be encouraged and sustained if God would appear to me and talk to me out of a bush or through the angel of the Lord.

Look at the Word of God. He has said everything that needs saying to people who are facing challenges. And it's in the Word.

Going to these stories and studying them is the same as being an eyewitness to the burning bush of being present and having those promises made to us. Because it's the same God talking to the same type of fallen creature and the same sort of challenges. God doesn't have to do that anymore because it's all been said.

God is efficient. He's not redundant. And it's already here.

It's already been delivered. It's been given into our hands. Each one of us is holding a Bible.

The complete, connected communication of God to us preserved miraculously for thousands of years and given to us in a very easily understood and digestible form. It's just up to us to

remember it. Let it be something more than a book on our lap.

Well, these signs that he gives to Moses, as we look at those, the first one is the rod. What is the rod? That's his shepherd's staff. That's what he has used to lead the sheep.

He is going to relinquish that function. He's going to cast it down. And in relinquishing that, it can be a fearful thing to have a change in our lives, to go in a different direction.

Many of us have had that experience. I was a marine for a number of years and then there was a time in the plan of God where I had to make a change in direction and leave all of that with its security and with its promise and so on and go in a different direction. That's a personal example for me.

All of us have water...