

## Exodus 3:11-4:17 How to avoid obeying God

### Introduction

What kind of reasons have you and I given to God for being unwilling to do some He has been prompting us to do? On too many occasions our responses may be excuses rather than a legitimate explanation for why it is impossible! God will never ask us to do anything we cannot accomplish in His strength. However, that has not stopped God's people down the centuries from making representations to the effect that we are politely wondering if God has made a mistake enquiring about our availability for a particular form of Christian service: 'Yes, I know Lord that the job needs to be done, but surely there must be someone else who is available and much better suited than me to accomplish that task in Your name?' This passage behind all the words that are uttered and explanations that are given has a subject who deep down does not want to do what he is being asked to do. The fifth and final excuse or reason is actually the one that he really believed –the rest were a religious cover story under the cloak of humility. Is there anything you have done or are doing for God that you said you couldn't or wouldn't do for Him? Most of us will have something that comes to mind. For me it was simply this: when I came to faith in Jesus I said that I would do anything for Him except serve in Christian ministry! I was willing to offer for all forms of Christian service in other capacities but with one exception. I know why I had that viewpoint. There were a handful of older ministers now with the Lord that I and many others had the highest respect for and when I saw the way they lived and the work they accomplished I knew that I could not possibly replicate what they had done or were doing. I was less gifted and less holy in comparison and my assessment was accurate and fair, it was not a misplaced humility. Yet over a number of years God met with me and finally through my regional (superintendent) minister I was informed that God did not want me to be someone else. When He calls someone to do something He doesn't make mistakes and He wants us to be ourselves not someone else in carrying out that calling. He knows us better than we know ourselves so this must be taken into account when we consider our responses to His calling. One of my biggest fears was my inability to solve people's problems – again the regional minister firmly declared that this is not expected. Many of life's problems cannot be solved but people want to know we love them and care for them. This is what is most important. Too often like me in that context, we can have a false impression of what God wants us to do or of the kind of person He needs to undertake a particular task. God knows what He is doing. Do not miss out on a calling from God or a particular form of service for Him because we have misplaced fears about our own adequacy for the task. I have found Philippians 4:13 such a reassuring verse over the years. *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.*

Here is Moses in front of the burning bush as an older and wiser and more reflective man. Forty years earlier he was so keen to get started on this ministry he was like a passenger chasing a bus down the street seeking to get on board, rather than wait for the next one in ten minutes time. His hasty action in disposing of the brutal Egyptian overseer had revealed a side to his character that God had to change before He could lead Israel out of Egypt. Each one of us is a work in progress. God taught Jeremiah, another Old Testament prophet, this lesson during a visit he made to a potter's house in Jeremiah 18:1-6: *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:<sup>2</sup> 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you My message.'*<sup>3</sup> *So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel.<sup>4</sup> But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.<sup>5</sup> Then the*

word of the Lord came to me. <sup>6</sup> He said, 'Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?' declares the Lord. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand, Israel. You and I are works in progress in whom God has invested all that is needed to enable us to fulfil our calling as Moses was prepared for his amazing calling. Let us look briefly at the different responses the older Moses gave to God on this occasion and use them to reflect on our own willingness to heed the voice of God.

### 1. **I am unworthy** (Exodus 3:11-12)

<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

<sup>12</sup> 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.' The Moses who hears and receives this call from God in the Sinai desert is very different from the person who sensed a call forty years earlier. As a man aged forty years old Moses was impatient to get on with the work for which he was very well qualified. It was indisputable that no other Israelite possessed a 'CV' that could be anywhere near as distinguished as that of the adopted son of an Egyptian princess. His educational background, his administrative experience that must have been gained despite the silence of the records, together with his military service in the Egyptian army eminently qualified him. In addition, he knew the key national leaders in the Egyptian Government having gone to school with many of them. He spoke the language and knew the social protocol for engaging with those in high places. Yet God did not chose to take him up on his offer of service at that time, waiting till half his life had passed. In a culture that celebrates youthfulness often at the expense of experience and mature years such a decision appears totally incomprehensible. Why would anyone let alone God act in such a manner? As children of our culture we can think that way about our prayer requests to God and our frustrations that situations in life are not getting resolved although time is passing quickly. 'Why?' is the question we silently or not so silently ask of God! Maybe someone here today is asking this question about some aspect of your life or that of someone close to you at the present time? I want to suggest that this section of the book of Exodus provides an answer as to why God on some occasions acts in this way.

The impetuosity and impatience of Moses in his earlier years was a problem that needed to be addressed before he could carry out his main life work in leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The gifts and experience described above were vital skills but there was more to his calling than the items listed on his 'CV'. These additional skills and experience were gained in the second section of his life spent in the desert. Moses had learned how to be part of the nobility and how to fit in with their manner of life, but it was a very different social context to any of the Israelites and the future life he would lead in the desert at the head of his nation Israel. Here in Midian life skills that he never expected to need were gained. Here in Midian he was an Egyptian 'nobody' who had to learn all the basic skills of life and work in that context. Things that children and young people in that desert community could take for granted Moses aged forty was only now beginning to learn from them and others around him. Maybe he had experienced inadequacy and vulnerability as he came to terms with his new life. Maybe he had to mourn the loss of his former way of life that he would never regain. Then he had to learn shepherding skills from Jethro's daughters. It was a hard and monotonous job with hardly any material reward. The sheep would offer little in the way of expressions of gratitude and some would need watching all the time to ensure they behaved. In fact it would be an ideal training for shepherding an ungrateful Israelite

nation that appeared to grumble their way to the Promised Land! Psalm 77:20 states: *You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.* God was preparing this person for this mission. Habakkuk 2:3 reminds us of the need for patience. *For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.* (ESV). Four decades later Moses gives this response to God on reception of his call to service: *But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’* (Exodus 3:11). I know that Moses is less than keen to accept this invitation from God, as is revealed later in the exchange, but I do also think that this is a genuine response. I think Moses is saying: God I am too old and too settled in my ways to take up this challenge which should be for a younger person with more energy and creativity! But God had other ideas as He can for you and me too. Are we willing to say Lord –help me to be willing to serve where You would want me to be most effective in reaching people for you?

## 2. **I am ignorant** (Exodus 3:13-22)

<sup>13</sup> *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?’* <sup>14</sup> *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.”’* <sup>15</sup> *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.” ‘This is My name for ever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.* <sup>16</sup> *‘Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, “The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.* <sup>17</sup> *And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – a land flowing with milk and honey.’* <sup>18</sup> *‘The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.”* <sup>19</sup> *But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him.* <sup>20</sup> *So I will stretch out My hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.* <sup>21</sup> *‘And I will make the Egyptians favourably disposed towards this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed.* <sup>22</sup> *Every woman is to ask her neighbour and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians.’* This is not the stupid question that it may appear at first sight! Moses has not forgotten which God He is worshipping and seeking to live for in Midian. The cultural context in much of the Old Testament era is that when God was planning something big that was a significant change to what had been taking place for His people that there was a fresh revelation of His identity with a special emphasis that related to the new calling. Moses here was in fact asking God what is the special emphasis you wish me to highlight in this next phase of your plans for your people? In Christian history over the last 2,000 years there have been particular emphases on which the Church was focused. The early centuries, particularly after the gaining of freedom under Constantine, focused on our understanding of who Jesus is and the Trinity. In the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century it was on the doctrine of salvation and how we receive it –through Christ alone, by grace alone received through faith alone; in response to the arid secular movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we have had spiritual revivals and in the last century the Pentecostal and Charismatic emphases highlighting the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Orthodox belief and practice go together! So what is the emphasis that God gives to Moses from the burning bush? Exodus 3:14 states:

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 wished to emphasize to Moses that He is Yahweh- God in covenant with His people; that He will stand with them and alongside them through the difficult years that are to come. God revealed Himself in Genesis 1 at the Creation of the world as Elohim – God who is above and separate from His creation. That emphasis was needed because so many other cultures and religions of the earlier centuries mixed up creator and creation. The one true God was completely different to the gods of the nations. However, to this enslaved people feeling abandoned and crushed by their oppressors a new emphasis was required to address their predicament. God had not changed but His people and their circumstances had! *I AM WHO I AM.* Is literally the eternally present One; I will not leave you God is saying because for the next few years things would get much worse for them before they gained their freedom. When Jesus was planning to return to heaven He reminded His followers in Matthew 28:20: *And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.* The struggling Italian believers were given a similar message three decades later in Hebrews 13:5-6: *God has said, 'Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.'* <sup>6</sup> *So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? I seriously doubt if Moses here or the Israelite elders when he reported God's revelation to them truly grasped how difficult the task would be. It is so easy to pay lip service to things that we hear without truly taking them in. This was certainly the case here.*

When God calls you and me into His service the end goal of our commissioning may be clear. However, the obstacles on the pathway may be less clearly defined. Our disappointments and setbacks may unsettle us emotionally for a time, but we must keep our eyes on the goal. We need to reflect repeatedly on the advice give to the Italian believers in Hebrews 12:1-3: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* In the Lord's work we will have encouragements and blessings, days when it is a real joy to come to church and carry out our particular ministries; however, there will be other days when we are struggling and frustrated that the blessings for which we are praying have not yet appeared; or that problems we are facing are undermining our joy in the Lord. Our constant challenge is to keep our eyes on Jesus not on the people around us. Remember how this will work out in the end. God will accomplish what He has planned. Isaiah 55:10-11 reminds us: *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, <sup>11</sup>so is My word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* Do you need this reminder from the Lord today?

### 3. I won't be believed (Exodus 4:1-9)

*4* *Moses answered, 'What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, "The Lord did not appear to you"?' For most of us, like John the Baptist whom Jesus called the greatest of the Old Testament era prophets, we have performed no great miracles, but that is not a reason for believing that you cannot accomplish something significant for God. God call you to be 'you' in His service and me to be 'me' – not somebody else! This is essential to understand. God uses ordinary people who are filled with His Spirit to accomplish the work entrusted to us. What does He use in this*

context? (a) **A staff** (Exodus 4:2-5): *Then the Lord said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied. <sup>3</sup>The Lord said, ‘Throw it on the ground.’ Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. <sup>4</sup>Then the Lord said to him, ‘Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.’ So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. <sup>5</sup> ‘This,’ said the Lord, ‘is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has appeared to you .* The staff was the work tool of a Shepherd. Interestingly this tool was the symbol of leadership in Egyptian society to which God was calling Moses to return. Here God wanted to take what Moses already had in his possession to use to accomplish a work for Him. It is a biblical principle. In II Kings 4:1-7 a desperate widow pleaded with Elisha to stop her creditors taking her children to sell them into slavery to pay for her outstanding debts. The account records this exchange between them: *Elisha replied to her, ‘How can I help you? **Tell me, what do you have in your house?**’ ‘Your servant has nothing there at all,’ she said, ‘except a small jar of olive oil.’ <sup>3</sup> Elisha said, ‘Go round and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few. <sup>4</sup> Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side. <sup>5</sup> She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. <sup>6</sup> When all the jars were full, she said to her son, ‘Bring me another one.’ But he replied, ‘There is not a jar left.’ Then the oil stopped flowing. <sup>7</sup> She went and told the man of God, and he said, ‘Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.’* If God wants to use you to accomplish a work for Him then the means will often be already in your hands or mine. You may have professional skills in business, for example, that can be used to make money for God’s work or employ people who needed it [David Gardiner & Safeguard Storage]; you may have sporting skills or cooking skills or some other ability that can be a means of living out your faith in practice in the community in which you live. Now we must never forget the supernatural aspect of God’s work- God turned this rod into a snake as an example to Moses of His power, but the demonic power that aided the priests of Pharaoh (Exodus 7:10-13) could replicate this miracle at will. We must never forget the essential place of prayer and our utter dependence on God to accomplish anything for Him. (b) **An illness** (Exodus 4:6-8) <sup>6</sup> *Then the Lord said, ‘Put your hand inside your cloak.’ So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, the skin was leprous – it had become as white as snow. <sup>7</sup> ‘Now put it back into your cloak,’ he said. So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh. <sup>8</sup> Then the Lord said, ‘If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second.* In a cultural context that saw illness as a sign of judgment from some kind of god, the power of Moses’ God over illness would be an eloquent testimony to the Egyptian people and their rulers. God is sovereign over our health not Pharaoh. No earthly ruler with credibility would claim the sovereignty over health and life and death of his subjects as then. But the Egyptian Pharaoh’s did, especially over the lives of the first born sons of Egypt. The plagues, especially the last one undermined his credibility on all these matters. The rulers of today claim secular sovereignty over our lives to make up rules for the governance of society that sometimes are contrary to God’s Word. They will only get away with it for so long before God intervenes. Usually apparently natural means are used to cause such rulers in time to lose their power. (c) **Water** (Exodus 4:9) *But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground.’* The waters of the Nile were absolutely vital to the Egyptian economy. Without it the country would have been in its most significant crisis of all time. God was signaling to Pharaoh I can take away the water supply of Egypt- how are you going to resolve that situation? These three things here involved ordinary situations of life- a tool from the workplace; illness that could be experienced by anyone and the essential drinking and washing water as a means to display God’s

glory. How may you and I use the ordinary means at our disposal to bring glory and honour to God?

#### 4. **I am not eloquent** (Exodus 4:10-12)

<sup>10</sup> *Moses said to the Lord, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.'* <sup>11</sup> *The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?' <sup>12</sup> Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'* Moses does not say I have forgotten how to speak Egyptian! He is saying in effect, 'Lord whenever I want to share my faith all the words come out jumbled up and this is not helpful'. God there must be someone else who is a better evangelist or who has a more exciting testimony than me. What I have to share is so mundane or ordinary that no-one will want to listen – or will do so only out of politeness. God I am not called to be an Evangelist like Billy Graham! However in Acts 1:8 we have the commission given by Jesus to each and every member of His Church. *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* It is God's power not our eloquence that changes lives. God wants you and me as His people to live authentic lives amongst the people around us. When they see that we are 'walking the walk' we will get some opportunities to 'talk the talk', but so often we have to earn a hearing by God-honouring lifestyles. Don't think or say: God I cannot... rather say 'Lord, if it is truly Your will then empower me to do .....'. The torture and suffering that Adoniram Judson and his wives endured in Burma from the hostile Buddhist regime communicated far more eloquently than the words they spoke about their faith. It is a church today that has known horrific suffering over the last half century, but its existence is an eloquent testimony to the God we love and worship. How you and I handle adversity? How you and I cope with setbacks are being watched closely by people yet to come to faith. Never underestimate what you might accomplish for the Lord through the way you live through hard or difficult times.

#### 5. **I am unwilling** (Exodus 4:13-17)

<sup>13</sup> *But Moses said, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.'* <sup>14</sup> *Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses and He said, 'What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. <sup>15</sup> You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. <sup>16</sup> He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. <sup>17</sup> But take this staff in your hand so that you can perform the signs with it.'* Spring 1984 while delivering the Bible readings at Spring Harvest Alan Redpath, the main Bible teacher that week, confessed to living God's 'second best' for His life! It was a profound challenge to all of us present that day. How willing am I to make myself available to live for God where He needs me to serve for Him? Saul lost the kingship of Israel for persistently refusing to obey God (I Samuel 15:23). By contrast at the wedding in Cana of Galilee Mary gave this instruction to the servants on duty concerning any request Jesus might make of them. *His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever He tells you* (John 2:5). How willing are you and I to heed that advice? I pray we will all be obedient followers of Jesus, for His name's sake, Amen.