

Sunday 10th May 2015 AM What would you give for a burning bush? - Exodus 3v1-14

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Purpose: To understand more about the process of salvation and realities of true spiritual experience through Moses' encounter at the burning bush.

INTRODUCTION

Bushes are expensive things

If you have been down to the garden centre of late and have wondered whether you should supplement your border with a new bush or two - you will probably realise that NEW BUSHES are EXPENSIVE ITEMS.

Quite possibly you will find that their price EXCEEDS what you are willing to pay.

HOWEVER - let me ask you: Q. What would you pay for *not* simply a bush *BUT* a BURNING BUSH?

Well you can keep that in mind as we are going to consider the BURNING BUSH story in Exodus 3.

Talking about faith

I don't know what your experience is - but talking about faith can often seem a difficult thing - especially if that takes the form of passing on to someone else the **CONTENT OF OUR FAITH**.

The problem is that giving someone **CONTENT** - can be interpreted as being a bit direct and dogmatic.

What about an ALTERNATIVE and that is where we give people **the PROCESS OF OUR FAITH**.

Telling someone how you went from one place of Spiritual understanding to another.

This can often be an effective way to present that "great gospel of our glorious God" without an unnecessary temperature creeping into the conversation.

One of the most well-known stories of all

Today, around the BURNING BUSH, we are going to consider someone's PROCESS.

For this we come to **one of the best known stories in the whole Bible - the story of Moses and the Burning Bush**:

- **NOW on THE PLUS SIDE OF THAT** -> we get to enjoy an exciting, an exhilarating, a very dramatic story.

And you have to say that the Bible is rarely, if ever, BORING!

Things are always going on and there are things to look at which truly amaze us.

- **AS TO A DOWNSIDE** - (and this is by no means automatic), when we do come to great and epic bible stories e.g.:

- the crossing of the Red Sea
- the Crucifixion of Jesus
- OR as here - the Burning Bush

we can become DAZZLED by the story and end up FAILING TO SEE beneath OR behind the individual parts that make the story up.

Interviewing a magician

It was just a couple of weeks ago that I met up with a magician who is a Christian.

He is using his skills of **SLIGHT OF HAND** in order to share something about the gospel and his Christian faith.

He explained to me that a very important part of doing "magic" (SLIGHT OF HAND) is that you:

- draw people's eyes **TO** what you **want them to look at**
- AND YOU EQUALLY - direct people's gaze **AWAY FROM** what you **don't want them to see**

Four nouns

So today - as we look at this **most familiar of scenes** - The Burning Bush - we are going to allow our eyes to settle on each of the **FOUR MAIN PIECES** that make up this story.

Q. What are they?

Well they are (and these are going to be our four points):

- #1 - The Bush
- #2 - The Fire
- #3 - The Angel
- #4 - The Call

Four hooks

And what I am going to be suggesting is that these 4 nouns, these 4 things, are very helpful to us in squeezing out the goodness of this famous story BECAUSE they all can FUNCTION like STURDY HOOKS which in their own right can carry quite a substantial weight.

So just imagine a row of four hooks - just like you might see as you enter the hallway of someone's house (and maybe you have this in your own home - I don't know) - but Exodus 3 Verses 1-14 are a bit like that.

Not 4 separate subjects

Now these 4 hooks are *not*, essentially, 4 separate subjects all in their own right.

If that were the case then I'd be effectively preaching 4 different mini-messages one after the other!! The theme

Q. So what then is the unifying theme?

Blaise Pascal story

Well let me introduce the theme by way of a **similar, an analogous story**.

Back in the 1600's there was a brilliant **French mathematician, physicist and religious thinker** by the name of:

Blaise Pascal.

It was Monday, the 23rd of November 1654 between 10.30pm and half-past midnight when he had a spiritual encounter that, forever after, changed the whole course of his life.

The only reason we know about this incident at all - is that when Pascal died in 1662, a piece of parchment was discovered sown in the lining of his jacket which gave the details.

His own description paints it in ways very reminiscent of Moses and the Burning Bush incident.

In fact, it has come to be known as "Pascal's Night of Fire".

This is what he wrote - his TESTIMONIAL:

FIRE

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

God of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

'Thy God shall be my God.'

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

He can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels.

Greatness of the human soul.

'O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee.'

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have cut myself off from him.

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters.

'My God wilt thou forsake me?'

Let me not be cut off from him for ever!

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.'

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I have cut myself off from him, shunned him, denied him, crucified him.

Let me never be cut off from him!

He can only be kept by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Sweet and total renunciation.

Total submission to Jesus Christ and my director.

Everlasting joy in return for one day's effort on earth.

I will not forget thy word. Amen.

The theme then is all about - **Q. How do we get, where do we find - a life-changing spiritual experience of God?**

In this story - (and you might just feel that it's all a bit unreal) - **we are going to see THE PROCESS** that Moses models for finding true spiritual reality.

So with no more ado - we're going to head through **THE FOUR NOUNS** that all play a significant part in understanding what is really taking place in the shadow of Mount Sinai on this "life-altering", "game-changing", "category-busting" day in Moses' life.

#1 then:

1] The Bush

Q. So what had brought Moses to this point?

Well, as you may know, Moses was not in the best place in his life.

He had been essentially an aristocrat in the court of the King of Egypt 40 years previous and then everything seemed to have gone "pear-shaped" for him.

His career spanning the past 40 years had been **that of a shepherd eking out a humble existence** spending many hours roaming the arid expanse of the desert of Midian.

If you wanted to summarise the life stages that made up these first 80 years for Moses - then you would get:

- The early years - 40 Wonderful Years
- The middle years - 40 Wilderness Years

One grand detour

I don't know if you have much cause to travel on motorways - but the **M25**, that massive 4-lane ring-road around London - is a particularly notorious one.

Despite the fact that it frequently has these 4 lanes - it can often give you the feeling that:

- **FIRSTLY** you are not actually getting anywhere! (at least not anywhere fast)
- **AND SECONDLY** that you are somehow on one very large "circular car park"!!

Moses might easily have felt that his life was "**on hold**" - that God had, for whatever reason - simply pushed that "**pause**" button.

An irony

It does seem a bit of an irony that the only reason that many of us come to find real Spiritual Experience is when we our lives are already on some seeming DETOUR or on some seeming DEAD-END ROAD.

So - if that is you - take courage and don't give up just yet.

Just another day - like any other

It was just another day and Moses was going through his usual routine:

Verse 1-3 "Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.'"

There is a simple principle here that whenever God does not seem to be specifically directing us - it is then that we are to be busy in doing what he has placed into our hands thus far.

Thomas Kuhn - A paradigm shift

Back in the 1960's **Thomas Kuhn** wrote a book looking at the history of science ("The structure of scientific revolutions").

And his thesis was that as people we are not at all as open-minded as we think because we have reasonably well established **INTERPRETIVE GRIDS** which tend only to be open to new information that will confirm what is already believed.

The only time that real advances or revolutions happen in science is when enough problems enter in such that people have to actually question **THE GRID** itself.

It was this book that gave popularity to the phrase "**THE PARADIGM SHIFT**".
A **PARADIGM** is a **pattern** OR **model** for thinking about something.
And Moses was about to have a "paradigm shift" thanks to the BURNING BUSH.

Strange sight

He describes it as a "**Strange Sight**".

Q. Why?

Well because it did not burn up.

Have you ever asked yourself:

Q. What would God need to do to get my attention?

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones story

Let me tell you a story.

And this is another "process of change" account - one that happened to a man by the name of **Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** who became one of the greatest British preachers of the last century. **Lloyd-Jones** was:

- a rising young doctor in his late 20's
- he was working under a top doctor in the best hospital
- his future was bright and promising, and he was religiously indifferent.

Now he knew a prominent doctor, one of the chiefs of medicine who had everything going for him economically and socially. He was dating a woman and she died suddenly.

In a daze, he asked if he could sit in **Lloyd-Jones'** room, and he sat staring at the fire for 2 hours without saying anything. This happening shook **Lloyd-Jones** greatly, not because his behaviour and grief was inappropriate, **but because he realized that no matter how powerful or prominent one is, yet the foundation of one's life was so vulnerable and so shaky.**

When **Lloyd-Jones** saw that man staring in the fire, he realized that he was completely out of resources, he saw, as he put it: "**the vanity of all human greatness**". He heard the call.

It was, you see - "**a strange sight**" - it was, if you like, "**a disrupting sight**" - that challenged and changed his grid.

OK - let's go on #1 The Bush, #2:

2] The Fire

1. FIRE - Self-sustaining

The first thing we notice about this fire here in **Exodus 3**, is that it does not need any fuel to sustain itself.

A fire out in the outback of the Sinai desert would not have been entirely unheard of, perhaps a lightning strike, perhaps just the remains of a fire left by some other shepherd has smouldered and been fanned back into flame and caused some sort of bush fire.

But **this fire** is different precisely because it is **self-sustaining**.

It is as Moses inspects this strange sight that God calls to him and as part of this initial conversation God gives to him a SELF-REVELATION in the form of a name.

It is there in Verse 14 but I'll read it from Verse 13:

Verse 13-14 "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.' "

I AM WHO I AM

There has always been a lot of discussion about precisely what this means: "**I AM WHO I AM**".

At the centre of this is the **Heb. verb "TO BE"** ('hayar') and so God is saying: tell the Hebrews that "**BEING ITSELF**" has sent you.

In this way God is saying that:

- He is **not** A BEING
- Rather He is BEING itself

He does not depend, He is not caused by anything, He just is and always has been.

A category buster

What we have here with the fire is something that is very category busting.

And Moses, just like Blaise Pascal many centuries later, was coming into a place that was going to reform his opinions. It was not that Moses didn't believe in God, it was just that he had never had this kind of personal experience of God.

2. FIRE - Beautiful AND Lethal

A second thing that fire symbolises is that it is BOTH:

- BEAUTIFUL
- and also LETHAL

On the one hand it is naturally VERY ATTRACTIVE and that is precisely the reason why we have to tell our children **not** to play with fire because it can also be FATAL if we get too close.

Spiritual Reality the same

God, in this image of fire, is showing Himself to be BOTH:

- **absolutely HOLY** - he is that REFINING FIRE (Hebrews 12 verse 29 - he is a consuming fire)
- **AND ALSO absolutely LOVING** - He has that **white hot zealous love** that will send His one and only Son to die upon the cross for wicked sinners like you and like me.

Very authenticating

If you ponder this image of FIRE for a moment - you will start to realise that actually this is **VERY AUTHENTICATING**.

Q. What do I mean?

Well, lots of people in the past have suggested that religion - especially Christianity - are false and are nothing more than a case of "WISH FULFILMENT" coming up with a kind of "CONVENIENT GOD".

The Philosopher Ludwig Fierbach said that: "God was nothing more than a projection of mankind on the backdrop of the universe". So:

- if your **natural constitution** leans towards being somewhat **CONSERVATIVE** in nature - then you will probably, in your SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS - imagine a God who is very pure and who comes down hard on those who do not achieve well.
- Alternatively - if your **natural make-up OR lifestyle** is more **LIBERAL** - then you will prefer and be pre-disposed to a God who is ALL-INCLUDING and ALL-FORGIVING and ALL-LOVING

We have a God of FIRE and of a PERPETUALLY BURNING BUSH:

- who has zero tolerance for sin
- and who has also has a passionate zeal for sinners in order to make them His own

This is not exactly the God that we would make up.

So #1, The Bush - a very disrupting sight

#2, The Fire - no convenient God

#3:

3] The Angel

It is pretty easy to overlook the angel in this passage because we are all taken up with the Burning Bush. But the Burning Bush does provoke a question and that runs along the lines of:

Q. Ok - it is one thing for the bush to be alight and not consumed BUT what about Moses?

He comes into close proximity to God and yet he is not consumed.

Think of that situation when God is about to give the Ten Commandments to the people and Moses is told in no uncertain terms to put a boundary around the base of the whole mountain because if even an animal crosses over it onto the mountain it would have to die.

Q. So what exactly is shielding and covering Moses?

After all, in most of the exchanges that are going on between Moses and God in this chapter and the next - we find that Moses is basically doing a lot of whining and whingeing!!

Pre-incarnate Christ

We meet quite a few angels in the Bible and these are created heavenly being that do God's bidding. We also see this angel which comes under the designation that we find in Verse 2 "The angel of the LORD".

And what we see is that the angel appears to him from within the bush and the very next thing we are given to understand is that God/the LORD is speaking to him from the bush.

This angel of the LORD seems to be both the same as God and also distinct from God.

Alec Motyer, the OT scholar, in his commentary on Exodus puts it like this:

"In Exodus 33 verses 1&2 the Angel is revealed as **the merciful 'accommodation' or 'condescension' of God**, whereby the LORD can be present among a sinful people when, were he to go with them himself, his presence would consume them.

We can put it this way: the Angel suffers no reduction or adjustment of his full deity, **YET he is that mode of deity whereby the holy God can keep company with sinners.**"

It maybe that you have already guessed that there is only one UNIQUE Angel of the LORD in the OT and that can only match up to the one spoken about in 1 Timothy 2 Verse 5-6:

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time."

We see here in this classic passage an early THEOPHANY, an early appearance of the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus providing a covering for Moses.

There is a sense in which we might see the BUSH as a picture of Moses - the fire of God's holiness burns around him and yet because of Jesus' covering, because of Jesus atonement that will one day be achieved, Moses upon that basis, is not destroyed.

It reminds us of the certainty of Jesus death and resurrection given that it's EFFICIENCY was being felt even a millennia and half before Jesus actually goes to the cross.

The Angel of the LORD shows us why it is possible for you and for I to have a TRUE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE.

Lastly - #4:

4] The Call

It is clear from this two chapters - Exodus 3&4 - that Moses is **receiving a call from God**.

It is not at all unusual in Scripture, that when God means to do business with someone - **he calls their name *not* once but twice.**

Genesis 22 - the angel of the LORD calls to stop him from slaying his one and only son Isaac: "Abraham! Abraham!"

(1 Samuel 3) When the LORD calls Samuel for the first time as a young boy in the temple - we get the same.

In the NT (Acts 9)- we have Saul on the Damascus Road - "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me!"

Q. So what evidence is there that our **Spiritual Experience** is really real, truly genuine?

Well there does seem to be a consistent pattern (or PARADIGM - if you prefer that word) in Scripture, which is that:

- **WHEN** God truly **CALLS US IN** (as He did with Moses)
- **THEN**, He also **SENDS YOU BACK OUT**

Isaiah, having had his Vision of God's holiness in the temple (a little akin to the burning bush here), responds to God's call:

“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

There is a second sense in which the Burning Bush is a symbol of Moses himself - because whenever we have a true encounter, a true Spiritual Experience of God - then we ourselves become a burning bush to other people.

We ourselves become a beacon, we ourselves become a curiosity, a lifestyle that is enigmatic and which breaks the rules and the ordinary secular paradigms that people are used to.

CONCLUSION

So when all is said and done: Q. What would you personally give for a burnish bush?

Q. Are you willing to turn aside and look - to come out of that stream of everyday sense experience, to have your sight disrupted and your grid changed?

Let us pray that you are and you will yourself become a burning bush for others to see and in turn be disrupted by.

Let us pray - AMEN