

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Not Safe, But Good

Exodus 3

Introduction

How would you describe the living God to someone who has never heard of him? What words or illustrations best define the Creator and Redeemer?

One-time atheist C.S. Lewis skillfully allegorized the character of God in his children's fiction series: *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In a story called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a friendly beaver is trying to describe the lion Aslan, Lewis's Christ-type, to two young girls:

"Is -- is he a man?" asked Lucy. "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion -- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he -- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and make 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 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."

This picture of the living God, besides being very picturesque, is very biblical. Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. A God of our own making is so small we can put him in our pockets and so obedient we can snap our fingers and get him to do our bidding. This kind of God never drops in unexpectedly and would never make us uncomfortable.

The powerful God described in the Bible rules with purposes that are always good and right and is not so predictable. He is like fire. Get on the right side of the fire and you have warmth, light and a continual source of energy. Get on the wrong side and you are consumed.

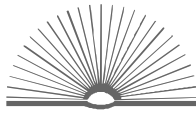
This description of the true and living God takes us to Exodus chapter 3. In order to set the scene we need to know that Moses is somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula herding his father-in-law Jethro's sheep. The people of Israel are still captive in Egypt some 200 miles from the house of Jethro. Moses has spent some forty years in the wilderness. Now at 80 years old he is about to have a personal encounter with the God of his fathers.

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (Exodus 3:1-12)

Moses must have experienced a combination of curiosity and terror at this spectacle. Remember that he was not a practicing Hebrew, for there was no Hebrew religion to practice. Likely all the religious training Moses had, aside from stories of the Patriarchs

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told by his family, was in the idolatrous courts of Pharaoh. It is true that his father-in-law held the title of “priest,” but there is no evidence that Jethro had any special revelation before Moses’ mountain encounter.

What was Moses used to seeing? Mundane things. Rocks. Sheep. Open skies. Familiar faces. Maybe an occasional brush fire to talk about at the dinner table. Moses was likely not a miserable man. He had a stable life with a family and a job to do. Egypt was a distant memory.

It is into such situations where the living God often bursts on the scene. Consider the visit of Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint a shepherd boy King of Israel and the glory that appeared to the shepherds of Luke two. This God may be indescribable to us, but he specializes in describing himself.

So Moses saw a fire and went to investigate. The spectacle drew him in because there was something unnatural about the way the bush burned. Fire normally destroys but here it did not. Voices normally do not come from fire or bushes but this time one did. It called Moses by name twice, “Moshe, Moshe!” and ordered him to remove his sandals.

If we are to describe this indescribable God it is best to do it in his terms—drawing on the way he revealed himself. Learn what Moses learned about this God.

He knows you.

Moses was alone in the wild and heard his voice being called. Who among the inhabitants of the desert of Midian could have called Moses by name? Shepherds call sheep by name but certainly not sheep, shepherds. Here a bush—or a fire in a bush—spoke in an audible voice.

This may seem like one of God’s lesser feats—knowing someone’s name—but the ramifications for Moses are significant. One might think, *If this unseen person knows my name, what else does he know about me?* This fire that penetrated into Moses’ personal information calls to mind John’s picture of the Son of God, “who has eyes like a flame of fire” (Revelation 2:18).

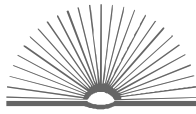
He is completely “other.”

Moses was informed of the dress code for “holy ground” and it was not a request. What is “holy ground?” The word holy means “set apart” or “entirely other.” This was not sinless ground, but special ground. What made it special was the presence of the person who was “entirely other” and revealed himself to Moses like no human had ever experienced since the Garden of Eden.

This is important to note because Moses needed to know that he was not conversing with a peer or even a greater man. This one who came to Moses and called to him made it clear that he was like nothing man can imagine.

He can be known.

Gods of human invention are either immanent or transcendent, but never both. They are either so great that they cannot be touched or they are so earthly that they cannot be respected. God identified himself before Moses could say, “Who are you?” God not only showed himself the ruler of all, he connected himself to the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt and their patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Why? It was not so much that he generally identified with the downtrodden, for there certainly were many of those around the world in that day. Also, the people of Israel were not morally superior to others in the world (as you find out reading further into Exodus). God identified himself with this specific group of people because he had committed himself to a covenant relationship with them even before they knew or acknowledged the fact.



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It is a comforting truth that this omniscient, Holy One so different from us takes the initiative in making himself known. His redemptive purposes in seeking his people trace back to all eternity and are motivated by his own pleasure.

He is good.

Some might focus on the judgment of God here and the imminent destruction of Egypt and identify this God first with his anger. Without discounting the importance of the judgment we need to note that the judgment was a necessary part of the rescue. The approaching rescue was his response to hearing the cries of his people and seeing their sufferings. Even the fierce consequences about to fall on Egypt were a function of his goodness to his people.

The very fact that Moses was permitted to survive in the presence of this Mighty One is evidence that he is good.

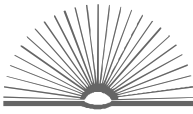
He is not safe.

You need only be reminded of the history of those who found themselves on the wrong side of that holy fire to understand that this God is not a plaything.

The God who is not safe, but good, has repeatedly demonstrated these qualities in history. It was that fire which passed between the pieces of meat when God made an unconditional covenant with the sleeping Abraham (Genesis 15:17). In Daniel the fire consumed the men who pushed Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace of judgment, but the presence of one who looked to the pagans like "a son of the gods" kept the men safe.

How this should make you different:

1. You need to seek this one who desires to be known. The natural man does not do this, but when he makes the first move as he did in Exodus 3 you cannot help but seek him. Call it curiosity if you must but it a heaven-sent, God-initiated thirst to find out more about him. He wants to be known. This is not a world with answers. All the paths that people choose to find enlightenment are like drugs that promise satisfaction but in the end give emptiness. Paul thought knowing Jesus was a surpassing greatness worth the loss of every earthly prize.
2. You need to carefully approach this one who desires to be known. This does not mean you stay away from him but that you refuse to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think. The picture of fire is best to bring up at this point. It is either an attraction or a judgment. You can approach boldly but you had better know the rules of engagement. You cannot make your own rules with fire.
3. You need to submit to the plan he has for you. Understand that I am talking to you who can approach the fire with confidence because of the One who took the fire for your sins. If you do not have this access this person will have no plans for you that you want to hear about. But if you, like Moses, are among the called you need to know that the work for which he has commissioned you is the best work. The work for which he has chosen you is *his* work.



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