

Don't Forget Your Staff

The Call of Moses

- ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"
- ¹² He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."
- ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"
- ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"
- ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, '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 forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.
- ¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,
- ¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.'"
- ¹⁸ And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.'
- ¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand.
- ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.
- ²¹ And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty,
- ²² but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians."
- 4:1 Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'"
- ² The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff."
- ³ And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it.
- ⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"-- so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand--

- ⁵ "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."
⁶ Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.
⁷ Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.
⁸ "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.
⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."
¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."
¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?
¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."
¹³ But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else."
¹⁴ Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.
¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do.
¹⁶ He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him.
¹⁷ And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

Exodus 3:11-4:17

Exodus 3:11-4:17

In the 1997 film "The Apostle," **Robert Duvall** plays Eulis 'Sonny' Dewey, a Texas preacher living a happy life with his beautiful wife. Until one day he finds her having an affair with a young minister named Horace. Hurt and enraged, Sonny takes a softball bat to the head of Horace, putting him into a coma. He flees, takes a new name: '**Apostle E.F.**' baptizes himself in a river, and anoints himself a preacher in Louisiana. He becomes a popular, well known Pentecostal preacher. One might say that **when E.F. talks, people listen.**

The point of this introduction is to acquaint you with the American religion's *modus operandi*. **Feel the inner call** of God (no matter what your personal life looks like), **anoint yourself**, and begin doing ministry **however you see fit**. At the seminary I attended, I saw this regularly. Young men and women felt a **tug at their hearts**, an

inner voice telling them they needed to go into ministry. So, they came, eager to serve, happy to be there, but ignorant of most things Scriptural, and easily distressed at all of that theology they were being forced to take. In fact, if you were to talk to them about actual callings in the Bible, they would be shocked at how very different it was from their own.

I am 100% convinced that a major reason the church in our nation is in such dire straits is because her shepherds have not understood what it means to be called into the prophetic-teaching ministry of word and sacrament. Look at this sampling of *Biblical* calling.

- **Amos** was minding his own business as a shepherd of sycamore figs, when suddenly the LORD “**took him from following the flock**” and said ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel” (**Amos 7:14-15**).
- **Jeremiah** was busy sucking his thumb and doing summersaults in his mother’s womb. Meanwhile it says, “**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations**” (**Jer 1:5**). I will come back to Jeremiah’s call a bit later.
- **Isaiah** was suddenly taken into heaven where he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne. He saw terrifying beings of heaven and was scared to death when suddenly the voice rang out, “**Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?**” Then Isaiah said, “**Here am I, send me**” (**Isa 6:1-9**).
- **Peter and Andrew** were fishing, casting nets into the of Galilee when all of the sudden Jesus walked by saying, “**Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men**” (**Matt 4:18-19**).
- **Paul** was on his way to kill a bunch of Christians when he was blinded on the road and brought down to his knees. Then a voice from heaven burned in his ears, “**Rise and stand, for I have appeared to appoint you as a servant and witness. I am sending you to open the eyes of the Gentiles. You are my chosen instrument**” (**Acts 26:16-18, 9:15**). It was this external objective pivotal event in Paul’s life that caused him to begin nearly every letter he wrote by saying, “**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle.**”

The calling we are talking about here *is* an external calling, every time. This is not some vague feeling that I should go and find myself at seminary or start some new creative “church” that will help people walk their journey of life better. It is a calling from the outside. A calling from God. A calling to the Word. Jeremiah says of the false prophets, “**The LORD said to me: ‘The prophets are prophesying lies in**

my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them to speak” (Jer 14:14). Apparently these prophets *felt* the call, but did not *hear* the call!

So, in the Scripture, the two things you find are that God calls the prophet to speak his word. The test of the prophet was whether he contradicted previous revelation and whether or not his word came true. In every case, God calls his servants to speak his words, to tell the LORD’s decision, to proclaim God’s message to the people. When it comes down to it, this really is the only thing the prophet had to do: be faithful to do what God said. God would take care of the rest.

It sounds easy. The problem is, it isn’t easy at all, at least not when you stop looking through illuminated eyes of faith and start gazing down into your own heart of darkness. One of the things that I find so fascinating about the calls of most prophets in Scripture, are how *reluctant* they are to “get into the ministry.” It’s pretty much the opposite of what I see today, and perhaps that should be a frightening thing.

Jonah is probably the most famous example of the reluctant prophet. God said to Jonah ‘Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city of Gentiles, and preach a message of repentance.’ Jonah says to God, ‘Not on your life! I know you are compassionate and merciful and I don’t want you to save my enemies.’ Therefore, he fled to the outermost regions of earth, to Tarshish, probably a sea port in western Spain, to a place that God surely would not be able to find him. **Amos** tells king Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son” when the LORD called me. I wasn’t looking for this vocation. It is God’s doing, and so you had better listen. **Jeremiah**, in a foreshadowing of the sermon today says, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (Jer 1:6). Does it appear to you like these guys were sending out prophetic resumes to make a buck?

In some ways I can relate to these men, because as any of you that know me will know, I didn’t go looking for this vocation either. It pretty much found me, through various people, especially pastors in High School, College, and later telling me to pursue these things. I never really wanted to be a pastor; I told Janelle when we met that I could not think of myself as a pastor. Yet, I always had a craving for the word, for knowing it and teaching it to others as it is, and not how I wish that it would be. Somehow, like Jonah, I suppose I probably have known for a long time that this was my preordained destination.

When we think of the **reluctant** prophet, **people rarely think of Moses**. Yet, as we will see now, Moses runs from his calling, not once but no less than five times in this section alone! Let me highlight these for you first, then we will look at them in greater detail. First, **Moses doubts himself**. “Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh’” (Ex 3:11). Second, **Moses doubts how he will be received** by others. “Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel [with this news from you], and ask me, “what is his name?” what shall I say to them’” (Ex 3:13). Third, **Moses calls God a liar!** “Moses answered, ‘But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, “The LORD did not appear to you’”” (Ex 4:1). Fourth, **Moses doubts his speech**. “Moses said to the LORD, ‘Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spleen to your servant, but I am slow of speech and tongue’” (Ex 4:10). Fifth, **Moses refuses God’s call**. “But he said, ‘Oh, my Lord, please send someone else’” (Ex 4:13). This is a man full of excuses about why he should NOT get into ministry. You have the wrong guy, LORD. You don’t want me.

Try to imagine yourself there on the side of the mountain in Moses’ place. You are talking to a bush. That’s strange enough. I have seen **Three Amigos** where they come to **the Singing Bush** that continuously bellows out old American folk songs. Believe me, that *is very* strange. But Moses’ bush is on fire, yet it is not consumed. I can’t even imagine what that must have been like. Inside of this bush is the very Angel of GOD, talking to you in all of his blazing glory. One would think that this sight would have been enough to make Moses jump at the chance to be God’s man. But in actuality, Moses does the opposite.

This is a man consumed with himself. He is a murderer. He is a fugitive of the Law. He is a despised shepherd. He doubts God’s word. Even after accepting the call, his on his very first assignment (at the end of chapter four) Moses shows himself to be disobedient to the most basic command of the covenant. He won’t even circumcise his own son! If you were heading up a Pastoral Search Committee and came across the following in the **Christianity Today Want-Ads**: “**Doubting, disobedient, self-seeking, notorious murderer fleeing the America’s Most Wanted List seeks Senior Pastor position in congregation of 2 million +**”, **would you hire him?**

Yet, it is in coming to understand Moses' resume that you get a better idea of the God doing the hiring. You get a greater understanding of who does the work of the ministry. You come to see the absolute need to trust God at his word, by faith alone, and to trust the means of grace that he has established to cause you to repent, believe, and grow in your walk with Christ. Because if you would look at the man, any man, I mean really look deep down inside of his heart, you would know that he is no better than you, that he is not called because he is special, or smarter, or wiser, or more holy. He is called because through him God's grace and mercy are exalted, for he is a sinner like the rest. Yet, somehow, through that sinner, God's word like seed is spread, sinners are converted, and children grow in their sanctification because of what *God* is doing through the use of ordinary, simple, broken, common means that display his grace.

Moses' Doubts Himself

Look at how God responds to Moses' hesitation, doubting, and downright insurrection. First, Moses asks, "Who am I?" Moses thinks the great story about to be written will cast him in the lead role. But as I told you a couple of weeks ago, there is a word play going on here between *who Moses is* and *who God is*. Moses is to get the hint that this isn't about him, but about the LORD. Moses asks about bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt (Ex 3:11). And indeed, from his point of view it will be him leading them out.

Covenant Promise

Yet God replies, "I will be with you" (12). This is the identical phrase said of Abraham, (Gen 21:22), Isaac (Gen 26:3), Jacob (31:3), and Joseph (39:2, 21). In other words, this is *covenantal speech*. It is the promise, the Gospel given to Moses in the OT! God is not going to leave or forsake his servant, for this is about God gaining a great name for himself throughout all the earth (Ex 9:16; Rom 9:17).

Covenant Sign

Not only will God always be with Moses, but he will provide a *sign* of this union when times of doubting arise. When God gives a covenant, there is always an accompanying sign, even as we have today in the Lord's Supper, a sign of the new covenant that we have redemption through the blood of Christ. It is a very means of grace. The LORD says that *this* is the sign for Moses: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (vs. 12). This was

fulfilled when Israel came to Mt. Sinai in Ex 19. So, we might call this a “**fulfillment sign**,”¹ in that the sign will not be given until *after* the task is completed. As such, it takes faith in order to receive the sign. But it is not like Moses has had no signs. After all, he is standing here talking to Christ in a burning bush!

Moses Doubts How He Will Be Received

Second, Moses doubts his reception back home as he calls the Elders of Israel together and tells them this tall tale. “**What shall I say**” when they ask me **who you are?** Again, we have already looked at this in past weeks, seeing that the LORD identifies himself with the covenant name: Yahweh. “**I Am**” God, not you Moses.

It is probable to me that the name is given for Moses’ sake, and not for Israel’s. Remember, Moses was raised as an Egyptian, so it is not unthinkable that this name of God was unfamiliar to him. Yet, when you read Genesis, Yahweh is prominent. It *is* unthinkable to me that God did not reveal his name to the Patriarchs of old, but only here, for the first time, to Moses. Thus, Israel knew exactly who Yahweh was. This is why God begins this whole discussion by bringing Moses’ biological father into the discussion. **I am the God of your father** (singular) (**Ex 3:6**). Moses’ father Amram must have known God and been a Yahweh-fearing man to hide him in a basket as he did. But also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

When he goes to the children of Israel and says, “**The LORD sent me,**” the LORD has seen your affliction, the LORD is remembering his covenant with Abraham, the LORD is promising to bring you back to the Land flowing with milk and honey, this would have been a powerful proof for them. Especially when this man, adopted by Egypt, was now telling them of their own God who called to Abraham in Babylon. This is why God adds to Moses, “**They will listen to your voice**” and together **you** (plural) and the elders of Israel “**shall go to the king of Egypt and say ‘The LORD, The God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God’**” (**3:18**).

There is a bit of a problem here, in that Sinai was months—not days—away from Egypt. And it is clear from the start that Israel has no intention of coming back. **How are we to understand this “three day journey?”** **Good question.** **Douglas Stuart**

¹ Douglas Stuart, “Exodus,” *NAC*, p. 118.

has an interesting suggestion that this was a polite, middle-eastern way of saying, we are going to leave forever.² We have idioms like this as well. If I say, “Do you have a second?” I am not literally asking for only a second of your time. Rather, I am asking for an indefinite amount of your time in a polite way. When you are sitting on an airplane runway and you hear, “We will be departing in five minutes,” you had better know not to take that literally, or you will become extremely frustrated after 3 hours on the tarmac.

But then there is the issue of the Pharaoh. We need to also keep in mind here that the Divine Name would be meaningless to Pharaoh, who served a pantheon of gods and was at some point in history considered a living god himself! In [Ex 5:2](#) he admits he does not even know who Yahweh is! This is why [Ex 3:19-22](#) explains to Moses how Pharaoh will not listen, how God will do wonders that would amaze Noah, and how Israel would eventually plunder the Egyptians on their way out of Egypt. As for why Pharaoh would not listen, we will be told later both that [God hardened his heart](#) and that [he hardened his own heart](#). Since this is such a complex topic, I will deal with it in a later sermon. As for the plundering and returning to the land, this is information that Moses needed to be aware that God had already promised to do for Abraham, which is undoubtedly why Moses wrote about it in [Genesis 15](#). I’ll have more to say about that also when we come to the actual exodus itself.

At this point, it seems as if Moses’ hesitation should be eased and he should jump right on to God’s exodus band-wagon, taking the reins and riding those horses straight back to Pharaoh’s palace. But that is not what happens.

Moses Calls God a Liar

Instead, we have one of the more remarkable statements ever said about a prophet. “Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my point, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you’” ([Ex 4:1](#)). Since the sign promised to Moses does not happen until later, what Moses says is understandable. If I were in his shoes, I would undoubtedly say the same thing. But when we come right down to brass tacks, it seems to me that this is nothing less than Moses [calling God a liar](#).

² Stuart, 125. See also, D. Stuart in connection with Jonah’s “three day journey” to Nineveh (*Hosea-Jonah*, WBC [Waco: Word, 1987], 483–88), and D. J. Wiseman, “Jonah’s Nineveh,” *TynBul* 30 (1979): 38; cf. Gen 30:36 and the general idiom “three days,” which occurs dozens of times in the OT and often means “a while” or “quite some time” (e.g., 2 Kgs 2:17).

Some commentaries soft pedal this. But compare what God says to what Moses says. God says to Moses, “They will listen to your voice” (3:18). And Moses replies, “They will *not* believe me.” Philip Ryken is absolutely right to call this the “height of impertinence.”³ This is the beginning of a long and sometimes tumultuous relationship between Moses and Jesus. I think of the time, for example, later in this book when Moses says to the LORD, “They aren’t my people.” And the LORD responds back, “They aren’t my people.” It reads like a husband and wife quarreling over their kids after they break something expensive: You spank him. No you!

There is a lesson here, I think, from what Moses does. It is a grave sin to hear a promise of God and then reject it like this. Think about God’s promise to justify you, to declare you righteous because of Christ when you trust in him by faith alone. Yes, you still sin, but that is exactly the point of justification. Justification is *not making you righteous*. But *declaring you righteous*. To doubt this declaration by looking within yourself because you feel so unworthy of it, is the opposite of belief, and it is a total failure to understand the gospel. You must believe the promises of God, no matter how much they seem like they can’t possibly be true for you because of what a miserable wretch you are. This is how you are saved. This is the *good* news that gives rest and comfort for sick weak broken people.

If you are one to doubt the promise, perhaps even verbally tell God that he isn’t telling the truth, then you really need to look at the way God responds to Moses here. Because God doesn’t fly off the handle and cast Moses away from his presence (remember, he has already promised to be with Moses!). Instead, in spite of Moses’ blunt words, the LORD is very patient with this fugitive from Egypt.

Sign #1 – Staff to Snake

He decides to give Moses three signs that will demonstrate to the Elders (and Moses?) that indeed he has been sent by the LORD. The first sign is to take the only object that Moses had with him, his *staff*, and turn it *into a snake*. “*Throw it on the ground*.” Moses, did so and it became a serpent and Moses ran from it. The LORD said, “*catch it by the tail*.” Moses did so, *pensively*, and it became a rod once more.

³ Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*, p. 108.

This first sign takes an ordinary thing, probably the only thing Moses had with him, thus demonstrating God's ability to do a miracle with anything at all. Yet, there is more going on here. **Why does the rod turn into a serpent?** You may think that it is because the serpent is the same shape as the staff. But couldn't the LORD have turned Moses' rod into a bee or a horse or a whale if he wanted to? Of course. In fact, the Egyptians had stories of the priests turning staffs into all sorts of things.

The serpent works on **two levels**. In **Genesis 3** we know that the Devil comes in the form of a serpent.⁴ In this story, as in pagan myths of origins, the serpent is associated with wisdom. But in *Biblical* history, it is God alone who is the source of true wisdom. By grabbing the serpent by the tail, it is almost as if God is saying that He controls the Devil and Satan has no authority over the LORD, despite what the Pagans like to imagine in reverse.

This idea is accented when you understand the second level. This may be getting ahead of myself a little, but oh well. The signs were also intended for the Pharaoh and were given to him later. Thus, we need to think about Egypt for a few minutes.

The Egyptians, like almost all other ancient cultures, worshiped the snake (only in the bible is this not true). Perhaps the Jews had been sucked into their paganism too! But **the snake's importance in Egypt is critical to understanding the story**. Pharaoh wore a crown or helmet depicting two goddesses in the form of cobras.⁵ Why? One Pharaoh (**Tanutamon**, 663 BC) relates how he had a dream wherein two snake goddesses—**Wadjet** and **Nekhbet**—gave him the power and permission to take the northland. Another says these words at his coronation:

O Red Crown, O Inu, O Great One,
O Magician, O Fiery Snake!
Let there be terror of me like the terror of thee.
Let there be fear of me like the fear of thee.
Let there be awe of me like the awe of thee.

⁴ The Watchers (Dan 4:13, 17, 23), identified in some places as 200 angelic beings that fell for the daughters of Eve (cf. Gen 6:4) are, in ancient texts, are often associated with serpentine imagery and the Garden of Eden (cf. 1 En 69:6, 12; *Yalqut Gen.* 44; *Bereshit Rabbati*, 29-30; 4Q543, *Testament of Amram*).



⁵ King Tut's Royal Crown:



Let me rule, a leader of the living.
Let me be powerful, a leader of spirits.

Pharaoh **Rameses III** wrote of a battle against his enemies, “Dreadful is thy serpent-crest among them; the war-mace in thy right hand.”⁶

Interestingly, the snake is also often found atop the Pharaoh’s scepter or staff. Elsewhere in Scripture, nations are likened to serpents that come from staffs. For example, in **Isa 14:29** we read that **the staff** of Assyria, though broken, is not dead. Out of this *serpent* will arise a snake much more deadly. Harkening back to Eden it says that this “**broken rod’s**” “**fruit**” “**will be a flying fiery serpent (seraphim).**”⁷ This may refer to Babylon, which earlier in Isaiah 14 is likened to Lucifer (cf. **Isa 14:12-16**).⁸ All of this is undoubtedly why Ezekiel says of Pharaoh, “**Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great serpent [tannin]**⁹ that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself’” (**Ezek 29:3**; cf. **32:2**).

Sign #3 – Bloody Water

Ezekiel gives me a good lead in to the third sign. Notice how the Nile is associated with the serpent-like Pharaoh. In Egyptian mythology, the snake occupies a significant place with the Nile. In fact, the god(ess) of the Nile is a cobra. The snake goddess Renenutet has a hymn sung in her honor:

I will make the Nile swell for you,
Without there being a year of lack and exhaustion in the whole land
So the plants will flourish, bending under their fruit.
The land of Egypt is beginning to stir again
The shores are shining wonderfully
And wealth and well-being dwell with them.

⁶ All stories are in John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the OT*, p. 92, 89, and 90.

⁷ It is interesting that the word Seraphim (Isa 6:2, 6, 7) means “fiery ones.” Yet, the word is used elsewhere only of the “fiery serpents” (Num 21:6, 8; Deut 8:15; Isa 14:29; 30:6) sent by God as his instruments to inflict on the people the righteous penalty of sin (Easton’s Bible Dictionary: *Seraphim*).

⁸ Oswalt suggests it refers to Assyrian which is only going to gain more strength when Esarhaddon comes to power. In either case, the idea of a nation being likened to the serpentine Devil is biblical (cf. Ezek 28:13-19).

⁹ Tannin is usually translated as “dragon.” However, this is the word used to describe Moses’ staff turning into a snake in Ex 7:9-10. In Exodus 4:2-3, the word is *nahas*. But Currid argues that these words are synonyms (p. 86-87).

It should be obvious that in turning the Nile to blood, that God is once more attacking the Pharaoh's false god and his own pride. And I will have more to say about this when we get to the 10 Plagues of Egypt.

Sign #2 – Leprous Hand

If it is true for signs 1 and 3, it is true in the second sign that is given to Moses, the sign of a hand that becomes leprous or diseased. When God stretches out his right hand, wonders are performed, miracles are produced, and freedom is procured. But in Egyptian literature, it is not the LORD who has the strong right hand, it is Pharaoh. In fact, Pharaoh's power is often described as a "strong hand."¹⁰ And it is not the LORD that is known to heal, but the snake gods and goddesses. So Moses puts his hand into his cloak and it comes out leprous. The meaning may be that Pharaoh the "strong hand" in fact has a diseased hand! If Pharaoh were to stretch out his hand, God would curse it, and his snake gods would not be able to do a thing to heal it. But when Moses sticks his hand back in his shirt, it comes out clean and healthy, because the God of Moses is able to do anything he wants.

John Currid has a great summary of this, "What the serpent contest portrays is a heavenly combat—a war between the God of the Hebrews and the deities of Egypt. For the biblical writer the episode was a matter of theology. It was a question of who was the one true God, who was the sovereign over the operation of the universe, and whose will was to come to pass in heaven and on earth."¹¹

Moses Doubts His Tongue (like Jeremiah)

Undoubtedly, Moses would have known all of these things, since he grew up in Pharaoh's court. Yet, this still does not help him to get on board. At this point, Moses doubts his ability to persuade. "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, but am slow of speech and of tongue" (Ex 4:13). (Let me point out that in this complaint and the last, Moses does not refer to God as Yahweh, but simply as Adonai. We get the idea that Moses isn't convinced even now of the power of this God). One would think that Moses has a shuddering problem. This is not exactly the Moses portrayed by Charlton Heston.

Again, the LORD is patient with Moses (which is good news for you and I), and informs Moses that it does not matter how well you can talk or how smooth your words may be. It reminds me of Jeremiah, who at his call told the LORD, "Ah,

¹⁰ Currid, p. 83.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 86.

Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (Jer 1:6). And how many Christians have I heard through the years give just this excuse for never talking about the gospel to people. Every Christian is given this priestly duty (Rom 15:16; NIV). It is not the sole obligation of the pastor! It is a pitiful excuse, and one that betrays the same sort of mixed-up theology that these two mighty men of God had. “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Ex 4:11-12). So be bold and tell of Christ!

Beloved, when you know the power of God, and begin to understand the ways of God, then a fire begins to brew in your belly that has to come out through your mouth. Yet, it is not your eloquence or ability to say everything perfectly that is going to convince a sinner of his erroneous ways.

Did not the Apostle Paul say to those Corinthians enamored with smooth speech and silky words, who said to Paul, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account” (2 Cor 10:10), did not Paul say, “I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I was with you in weakness, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:1-5).

There are so many contemporary applications in the present gospel crisis of the American church that I hardly know where to begin. But just know this. God saves by his power, through his gospel, not through your ability or persuasiveness, certainly not through your flattering words or your cunning craftiness to get people to believe you. In fact, it is often the case that when you feel the least persuasive, God uses your words more, just so that he can gain the glory of salvation for himself! He wishes to shame the wise through a message that most believe is foolish. For the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

Moses refuses God’s Call

Yet now we come to the last refusal of Moses. God has shot down every excuse he can think of. Now all that is left is to reveal his true heart. “Oh, my Lord, please

send someone else.” Moses is the anti-Isaiah who gladly accepted the call. And God is not pleased with a person who has been given so many promises and comforting words, yet still refuses to believe them.

It says that “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses.” Notice, it does not say that the LORD left Moses in a huff. It does not say that the LORD kicked Moses off the mountain. Rather, God must be true to his word. He will be with Moses and with his mouth and with the elders and with the people. He has sworn it.

Nevertheless, for his refusal, Moses loses out on a great privilege that will be given to Aaron and *his* sons: that of a priestly covenant, the honor of serving before God in his temple forever. It is interesting that we know nothing of Moses’ lineage after his sons die! This is the meaning of God mentioning Aaron’s lineage as a Levite. I will have much more to say about this in the future.

What is important now is to recognize that even in his anger, even in making a concession to Moses’, God will still have Moses be his man. Moses’ cannot win this argument. The good news will win out over Moses’ stubbornness. The word is powerful. Moses will be still be greater than Aaron (indeed ‘as God to him showing the very close identification between the LORD and his anointed messenger). Aaron will only be the mouthpiece. Moses will have direct access into God’s very presence.

Application

In vs. 18 we see that Moses has indeed given in. What are you to make of Moses’ finally giving into God? And why is God so patient with Moses? The answer lies in thinking about the plan of God from a bird’s eye perspective. God was going to use Moses, the early Messiah who copies our Lord’s life in every detail, to deliver his people. And so God had to win out over Moses, if the plan was going to ultimately succeed. This is exactly what we find happening in this story.

But since Moses was an early copy of Christ—who is the Lamb prepared before this episode to be slaughtered for our sins—God had to win out in order that he might forgive Moses of his insurrection and insubordination. You must remember that the way Moses acts here is sinful. God’s wrath which arises out of his holiness and justice must be appeased, if not by Moses, then by the Greater Moses. And so, as

Paul says, God in his forbearance looked over the former sins ([Rom 3:25](#)) in order to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus ([26](#)).

Where Moses was reluctant, Jesus was willing. He hears the call of the Father in eternity past and happily accepts the work given to him. When his hour of trial comes, though he does not want to die, he submits his to the will of the Father saying, “Not my will but yours be done.” Thus, the LORD dies upon the cross for your sins, so that he might forgive your reluctance and insubordination before, during, and after your call too. If you will believe this, then God will credit it to you as righteousness, because by faith you glorify God and his works.

Obviously, Moses is not someone you should be emulating when you read this story. Like Moses, I feel like I have fought my calling many times, so my shame. My guess is, many (perhaps all) of you have done the same thing at one time or another over coming to Christ or doing what he wants you to do afterward. For whatever excuses we come up with, we just do not seem to want to do what God would have us to do. The answer to your excuse is to give up on yourself and look to Christ. Then, listen to the Holy Spirit, to his call, to the Word, and to the Church for confirmation of what you think you are hearing. Don’t call *yourself* like Sonny in *The Apostle*.

But like Moses, you will need nudges in the process of sanctification. This is the function of the Law in the life of a Christian after salvation. In the *Fellowship of the Ring*, Bilbo comes to learn that the ring he has carried for fifty years is none other than the one true ring, a ring of evil power that holds its grips so tightly that those who hear its call do not even realize it. Just as Bilbo is ready to walk out the door of his hobbit hole—free of the ring’s power once and for all—Gandalf has to remind him, “Bilbo, the ring is still in your pocket.”

Our last verse today ([4:17](#)) effectively says, “And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.” The staff was the instrument that God had given to Moses to accomplish his purposes. But it appears that after finally giving into God’s will, Moses is ready to head down the mountain to Jethro’s house, finally gung-ho for his new found purpose in life. Yet, in his zeal, he seems to forget the means, as he has left it by the bush.

Moses cannot do the task without the means, and likewise, **neither can you do anything spiritually valuable without the means of grace** (Word: Law and Gospel and Sacrament: Baptism and the Supper) and the means of discipleship (prayer, bible study, service etc). The means of grace are strictly things that God does for you! The means of discipleship are things that you do in obedience in order to show your love for Him.

If you run off the mountain today and head for home empty of those tools that God uses to work wonders in your life, then you will find yourself right back to trying to do it all your way, and you will have learned nothing. So let me paraphrase that verse for you. I leave you with this lesson: **Friend, don't forget your staff. The rod and the staff, they comfort you!** And *comfort* is what you need if you are to be a useful tool in the kingdom.