

God Remembers: Anyone but Me!

Exodus 4:1-17

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Now if you would, please take your Bibles and turn to Exodus chapter 4. Exodus 4, page 47 in the church Bibles. Once you have them open before you let's bow our heads as we pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, in Jesus' name, amen.

Exodus chapter 4, reading from verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

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.'" The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." 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. 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 – '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.' 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. 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. "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the later sign. 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."

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." 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? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach

you what you shall speak." But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." 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. 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. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

Amen, and we thank God that He has spoken in His holy Word.

Called for Ministry: The Story of John Knox

April 1547 in the castle of Saint Andrews, Scotland, there is a small congregation of reformed Christians gathering under the ministry of a man called John Rough. And with them is another young man, also called John, who served as a schoolmaster to the families of that congregation. And they were so impressed with him, those families, they had urged him repeatedly to become the assistant minister to John Rough. John Knox, the young man was called, he refused every time they asked believing that he had not been called to Gospel ministry and feeling his own inadequacies profoundly. And so the congregation, not taking "No" for an answer, decided to ambush John Knox on the appointed Sunday. John Rough rose and preached a sermon on the call to the ministry at the end of which he said the following, addressing John Knox directly – you can imagine him, can't you? A deer in the headlights being called out by name in the middle of the congregation! This is what John Rough said to him. "In the name of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the name of all that presently call you by my mouth, I charge you that you refuse not this holy vocation but as you tender the glory of God, the increase of Christ's kingdom, the edification of your brethren, and the comfort of me whom you understand well enough to be oppressed by the multitude of labors, that you take the public office and charge of preaching, even as you look to avoid God's heavy displeasure and desire that He shall multiply His grace to you." Then he asked if this was the mind of the congregation. They unanimously said that it was. Knox rose to try and address them, words failed him, he burst into tears, and he fled and hid himself in his room. From that day until the day he was compelled by the congregation at last to actually begin preaching he was utterly miserable. He did not believe he was up to the task nor did he really believe that God had called him. Actually as history showed, Knox was clearly called by God as well as by the congregation and used wonderfully in the history of Scotland.

The Perfect Sufficiency of God for Every Challenge

Sometimes, the call of God is absolutely clear. That is not the issue. Sometimes the issue is our unwillingness to submit to His call in our lives when it comes. That is a pattern you find in other places in Scripture. One thinks, for example, of Jeremiah in chapter 1 and verse 5. Jeremiah, in a similar way as we see Moses doing here and in a similar way that we find Knox doing in the castle in Saint Andrews, refuses the call of God and God has to rebuke him and deal with him. Again and again, both in Scripture and in history, the call of God comes to people who are conscious of their weakness and who resist that call out of fear and insecurity. The message of the passage before us, however, is that the key in determining and shaping a life of Gospel usefulness is not your private assessment of your own gifts and qualifications for the work. No, the key to a life of Gospel usefulness is the endowment and gift of God and His call on your life. That's what you need. If God calls you He will gift you and you ought not, you must not, refuse his summons. God will supply the equipment; that's His business. You must answer the call; that's your business.

That's the lesson actually of verse 10 of chapter 3 through verse 17 of chapter 4, which is the passage I want us to think about this morning. Because backing up to the middle of chapter 3 I do want you to notice the five times that Moses speaks here. You'll see them if you look at the passage. Five times he speaks – in verse 11 of chapter 3, verse 13 of chapter 3, verse 1 of chapter 4, again in verse 10, and then finally again in verse 13 of chapter 4. Five times Moses speaks, each time to offer an objection, a reason why he should not be the one to answer the call of God in his life. It's remarkable how adamant Moses is in his refusal. Even more remarkable, however, is the response of God. To each objection God displays before Moses His perfect sufficiency for every challenge. The sufficiency of God for every challenge. God will supply the equipment; Moses must answer the call.

I. Sufficient for our Qualifications for Service

Let's take a look at the first objection, shall we? Verse 11 of chapter 3. In verse 10, God has sent Moses to be the deliverer of Israel back to Egypt, but Moses, look at verse 11, responds with an objection. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" And God's answer in verse 12, you'll notice, is to redirect Moses from Moses to God. In fact, that is His answer every single time Moses objects. "You're asking the wrong question, Moses. You're thinking about yourself and feeling your smallness and your weakness and your inadequacy compared to the task. And guess what? You are small and weak and inadequate compared to the task but that's not the point. You're asking, 'Who am I?' when you ought to be asking, 'Who's with me?' I will be with you and I am up to the task." Moses' concern here is about his qualifications for the work.

And some of us, I rather suspect, rule ourselves out of Gospel service. Maybe God is calling you to be a preacher of the Gospel. Maybe God has given opportunities for some particular area of service in your workplace, among your family, among your friends. Maybe there is some clear work that He has positioned you to fulfill in the church of Jesus Christ and you are resisting, you are reluctant, because you feel your inadequacies; you've ruled yourself out. "Who am I?" that's what you're saying. "What can I do?" You're asking the wrong questions. The right question is, "Who's with me? Is the God of grace and glory with me?" If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, though you may be small and weak and inadequate, your God is not and He is sufficient. So God answers Moses' concerns about qualifications by pointing Moses to God. God is sufficient for our qualifications for Gospel service.

II. Sufficient for the Content of our Service

And then notice, secondly, in verse 13 if Moses first asks, "Who am I?" he now asks, "Who are You?" He wants to know what name to tell the Israelites is God's personal name as we've been seeing over the last two weeks. This is one question the Lord delights to answer. It really is at the very heart of God's concern for Moses. He wants Moses to grasp the sufficiency and the glory and the grace of his God, that Moses in turn might be His instrument in proclaiming his God to the world. And so God tells Moses His name. "I AM who I AM" – the transcendent, self-existent God of unending majesty and unfailing faithfulness. And this, notice, is to be the content of his message when he goes back to Egypt. Not so much what God will do, although he's certainly to proclaim that, but even more foundational he is to proclaim who God is. God is sufficient for our qualifications for service but He's also sufficient for the content of our message as we serve. He wants to be on the agenda all the time. He wants to be the heart and burden of your message and your life.

Have you ever shared your testimony? It's a really good thing to do, to talk about how God has saved you and changed you in His grace. Do ask yourself, however, whether when you tell your story who the main character ought to be. It ought not to be you; it ought to be the God who saved you. The burden of your message is not how marvelous it is that you once were lost and now are found. The burden of our message is rather to point to Christ who found you and saved you, who's now all in all to you, that you want the world to know along with you. God is sufficient for our qualifications for service and He is sufficient to be the content, the burden of our message as we serve. We are to say to the world as we point them to Christ, "Behold, your God!" and call them to bend the knee to Him.

III. Sufficient for the Credibility of Our Service

Then there's the third objection – chapter 4 verse 1. God, at the end of chapter 3, has told Moses, hasn't He, "The people will listen to you, and even recalcitrant, stiff-necked, pagan Pharaoh eventually will give in and let My people go as I bear My mighty arm in defense of My covenant people," which makes Moses' answer in chapter 4 verse 1 really quite stunning as he objects to God's call. Look at it this time, verse 1 of chapter 4. "Behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" God has shown Himself sufficient for our qualifications for service, for the content of our service; this time He shows Himself sufficient for the credibility of our service. That is Moses' great fear here, isn't it? He's worried about his credibility. "No one's going to believe a word I say! I tried to save Israel once before, remember? That turned out to be a disaster. The Israelites rejected me; the Egyptians are still hunting me. Here I am, a dropout in the back side of the desert. Who will believe a word I say?"

The Miracle of the Staff

And so in answer God gives Moses three miracles in verses 2 to 9. Do you see them there? The first is in verses 3 to 5. The staff in Moses' hand is transformed into a serpent. Unsurprisingly, scaring Moses half to death it seems. God tells him then to catch it by the tail. Now you may have noticed I'm no Pentecostal snake charmer and yet even I know that's not how you take hold of a snake, especially a poisonous snake. You grab it right behind the head so it can't bite you. But as soon as Moses obeys, this venomous snake is returned to a lump of wood in Moses' hand. You might know that the emblem of Pharaoh's rule in Egypt was a cobra. He wore a cobra emblem on his crown – the great symbol of the king's potency and power. This is a clear demonstration, isn't it, that Yahweh, the LORD, was indeed with Moses. He can reduce the cobra to a wooden staff, catching it by the tail without fear. Pharaoh isn't the real king in God's world. The Lord reigns and His Word is true. That's the message.

The Miracle of the Leprous Hand

Or verses 6 and 7, the second miracle. This time Moses is to put his hand inside his cloak. When he draws it out it would be covered in leprosy. You can picture the absolute horror of that disease, an infectious disease. The only response of the community at that time to it was to lock someone away in strict and complete isolation. You can imagine someone walking and standing up and sneezing on you all and then telling you he had Ebola. That kind of alarm. And then he puts his hand inside his cloak and draws it out and he is whole. Here is now the God who is with Moses with His message in whose hand He holds the power to wound and to heal. Life and death, wrath and mercy, are His. And that will be the message largely of the remainder of the book of Exodus as God both judges and delivers.

The Miracle of Water into Blood

And then the third miracle in verses 8 and 9. “If they will not listen to the first two Moses is to draw water from the Nile, pour it on the ground, and when he does the water will turn to blood. The Egyptians worshiped the Nile as a god. The Nile was the source of the fertility of the land. Even while other nations suffered drought and famine, Egypt was fertile and rich in resources because of the Nile. And here is Yahweh, the LORD, reducing the Nile to poison with a word.

Attesting and Authenticating the Word of God across Redemptive History

What’s going on? These three miracles are really simply designed to point not to Moses but to God, not to the messenger but to the God who speaks by the messenger His message to the nations. God is attesting His own Word supernaturally. You may well know actually that the miracles of Scripture are not distributed evenly across the pages of God’s Word. They cluster around significant movements in the unfolding drama of salvation history. There are many miracles around the Exodus, others at the entry of the land of Canaan, still others during the ministry of Elijah and others during the ministry of Daniel with a few notable exceptions. The point is, God gives miracles not to be normative experiences for all of God’s people; He gives them rather to attest to each new phase of redemptive history, of revelation as it dawns, which is why there is an unprecedented explosion of the supernatural and the miraculous attending the coming of Jesus Christ and the work of the apostles who explain the significance of His person and work to the world. Those miracles were really God’s way of saying, “My Word is true and its credibility does not rest in the end on the credibility of the messenger but on the credibility of the God whose Word it is.”

The supreme attestation and authentication of the Word of God would come with the greatest of miracles – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That’s what Jesus Himself said, remember? Matthew 12:39 – the Pharisees demanded a sign to demonstrate the truthfulness of Jesus’ message. He said, “No sign will be given to this generation but the sign of the prophet Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the Son of Man be.” Jesus would rise from the dead on the third day. That would be the great final proof and evidence that God’s Word is true. You don’t need to prove the truthfulness of Scripture; you need only proclaim that it is true because the God who raised again from the dead the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, stands behind and over His Word and speaks in His Word and He attests and authenticates its truth.

IV. Sufficient for our Competence to Serve

God is sufficient not just for our qualifications for service, not just for the content of our message as we serve, nor even simply for the credibility of our service in the third place, but fourthly, God is sufficient for our competence to serve. Look now at Moses’ next objection in verse 10 of chapter 4. “O my Lord, I am not

eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant” – shades of Adam’s complaint in Eden. “The woman whom you gave me, she gave me to eat and I ate. It’s your fault.” “You’ve been talking to me for a while now, Lord. Can’t you do something about this poor lisping, stammering tongue? But you can see I’m not eloquent and I’m still not eloquent; clearly unfit for duty.” Maybe he had a stutter; maybe he can think the words but saying them in front of a crowd is another matter entirely. Whatever the case, Moses argues he can’t obey because he’s incompetent for the job. He just doesn’t have what it takes.

You may know the feeling. You remember that moment when there’s someone with you to whom you have a clear opportunity to present the Gospel, a wide open door for the Good News, and you know it and your heart is pounding in your throat and your palms are sweaty and your mouth has dried up and you didn’t speak. And you said, “I am slow of speech. There are other folks that are better at this than me. I’m just not up to the task. It’s not my gift.” Well God isn’t impressed with that excuse, is He? Not on Moses’ lips and certainly not on ours. Verse 11 – “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing your blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” Moses is still looking in the wrong direction, isn’t he? Moses still fills Moses’ own horizons and God is working now to lift his head to look away from himself to the sufficiency of God for the work to which God was calling him. “Your mouth belongs to Me. Your stutter is Mine. I made you. I will use you. I am sending you. Your business is obedience. The results are not your business; they’re Mine.”

A Case in Point: The Story of Spurgeon’s Conversion

You may well know the story of the conversion of Charles Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher, Baptist preacher. He had set out one Sunday to get to worship as usual, a huge snowstorm prevented him so he turned aside to a small, primitive Methodist chapel in his hometown. And the preacher, the usual preacher in that chapel didn’t make it that day either because of the same snowstorm. Here’s Spurgeon’s own account of what happened next:

“At last,” he said, “a very thin looking man, a shoemaker or tailor or something of that sort went up in the pulpit to preach. Now it is well that preachers should be instructed but this man was really stupid.” These are Spurgeon’s words, not mine; don’t get mad at me! “This man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, ‘Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.’ He did not even pronounce the words rightly but that didn’t matter. He expounds his passage as best he can. When he had managed,” Spurgeon says, “to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. He then looked at me under the gallery and I dare say with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eye on me as if he knew all my heart he said, ‘Young man, you look very

miserable.' Well," said Spurgeon, "I did, but I had not been accustomed to having remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow; struck right home. He continued, 'And you always will be miserable, miserable in life and miserable in death if you don't obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.' And then lifting up his arms he shouted as only a primitive Methodist could, 'Young man, look to Jesus Christ! Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live!'"

It was a poorly delivered message, thrown together on the spot by an untrained, unprepared member of the congregation who stood up to fill the pulpit. He was, as Spurgeon put it, very stupid, but he preached Christ as the only hope of salvation for sinners and pressed Jesus on Spurgeon's conscience and God used that unlettered, no-name, ill-spoken Christian to bring one who would become the greatest preacher of the Gospel of grace in the English language to faith in Jesus Christ. "Who has made man's mouth? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." God loves to use lisping, stammering tongues. The apostle Paul knew that lesson well. 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verses 1 to 5. "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling and my speech and my message were not implausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." God delights to take poor lisping, stammering tongues and to fill them with His Word and by them to do mighty things that those whom He brings to know Christ through them might trust not the messenger but the God who has spoken His message with power through them. He loves to take weaklings and cowards and incompetents. That's what we tell ourselves we are sometimes, isn't it? Weaklings and cowards and incompetents. He loves to take us and use us. Preach Christ. Fill your mouth with the message about Jesus. Do it haltingly. Do it poorly if you must, but proclaim Christ and see how God will use even you, even you.

V. Sufficient for our Commitment in Service

God is sufficient for our qualifications for service, for our content as we serve, for the credibility of our service, for our competence to serve, and then finally God is sufficient for our commitment in service. Poor Moses is at the end of his rope, verse 13. He's run out of excuses; now he's really pleading. "O my Lord, please send someone else! Anyone but me! I just don't want to do it." And God is angry but He is also gracious. Look at His answer to Moses in 14 to 17. If I might sum it up it is simply this – "Aaron your brother will become part of the team." You're not alone in the work. You have partners; you need one another. And God has given us a team. We were seeing that earlier as brothers and sisters were pledging

themselves to live out their Christian lives within the fellowship of the church. We need one another. God has given us brothers and sisters. How often has it been the case that you have stayed the course, remained on the tracks, because some other brother or sister, perhaps someone within your line of sight right now, equally weak as you, was willing to stay the course with you, had their eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of the faith, and were running the race marked out for them and their example has helped you stay the course yourself so that you can say with Paul in Philippians 1 and verse 4, "I thank my God upon my ever remembrance of you for your partnership in the Gospel"?

Looking to Christ for Grace and in Obedience

God has given us Gospel partners so that when our commitment wavers they might stand with us and we might run the race till we cross the line and win the prize. You need your brothers and sisters. God in His grace, in His sufficiency, has provided you a church that you might be faithful in your calling. We need each other. That's part of God's gracious provision. God's sufficiency means we have no excuses; we have no excuses. God's sufficiency means we know no real lack. His strength is made perfect in weakness. His grace is sufficient for you. Did you hear that? His grace is sufficient for you. What excuses are you offering today for your disobedience? How are you attempting to justify your refusal to submit to the call and summons of God in your life? There is no lack that you may have that God cannot supply; none. There is no fear you can ever face that He cannot overcome or see you through. No valley so dark through which you may pass that His rod and staff will not comfort you. No challenge to your message that His power does not answer. So obey. That's part of the lesson, part of the message, part of the call of our passage. Obey. You have work to do; I have work to do. Let's go! But obey looking up. Obey looking up. Obey looking away from yourself to the God of all grace who is sufficient for you. Look to Him not to yourself, and the Lord will use you for His glory in ways you could never have imagined.

Amen, let us pray.

Our Father, we thank You that You are truly sufficient for us. We cast ourselves upon You acknowledging, as Moses clearly did, our utter weakness and inadequacy, even our incompetence sometimes. Help us to remember the key question is not, "Who am I?" but "Who is with me," to remember that Your grace is sufficient, Your strength made perfect in weakness, and therefore open our lips that we may declare Your praises, in Jesus' name, amen.

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