

## Signs and Wonders for Moses

Exodus 4:1-9

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 4. Ever since we entered Exodus 3, we have been witnesses to an ongoing conversation between the Lord, the God of Israel, and Moses, His servant. This conversation began with Moses seeing the curious sight of a bush which was burning, but not being consumed on the side of Sinai as he grazed sheep. And it turned out to be a manifestation of God. Moses was curious, and God approaches him and announces to him His plans for Moses to be His spokesman to Pharaoh and His leader for His people. And we have already said that Moses, so far in this conversation, has raised two questions or objections or problems with God's plan. Initially, having been told that he would be the spokesman of the Lord God of Israel to Pharaoh, Moses responded with humility simply asking, "Who am I to do this? What qualifications have I to do this particular work?"

And God assured Moses as we study that passage in Exodus, chapter 3, by telling him I'm going to show you that this is going to be done, and the great sign that I'm going to show you by which this is going to be done is that you're going to bring the people of God back here to Sinai, and they're going to worship Me right here. And that's an interesting sign, isn't it? Because it's a sign that Moses himself is not going to be able to see until he is actually done that which God called him to do. That is, to go and be the spokesman for Pharaoh, and to go and be the leader of God's people and to go through all the problems and difficulties that was entailed. It is a sign of the certainty of God's purposes. Moses, here is going to be the sign to you whereby you know that you are the man that I have chosen. You and the people of Israel are going to worship Me here at Sinai. So certain is the word of God. God even, in that announcement to Moses, is showing His sovereignty over the whole situation.

And then Moses asks another question. "Well, Lord, who do I say that You are to them? How do I tell them that you have revealed Yourself to me? What name will you tell me to show the people of God that they might know that I have truly seen the living God. That the living God has actually spoken to me." It's a perfectly natural question that the people of God would question him. Well, when God revealed Himself to Jacob and to Isaac and to Abram God revealed Himself by a name. Sometimes as the God of your Father, sometimes as the God of Bethel.

Sometimes by other names. What name, what special name has God revealed to you, Moses, whereby we might know that the one true God, the real God, the God of our fathers has indeed manifested Himself to you. And so the Lord again comforts Moses and He gives him this incredible manifestation of His name, the name of the Lord God to take to his people. Tonight, as we cross the chapter boundary from chapter 3 to chapter 4 Moses raises one more question or problem or objection. The chapter boundary is artificial. We are still in the same conversation. So bear that in mind as we hear God's word in Exodus, chapter 4, beginning in verse 1:

Then Moses answered and said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say, for they may say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you.'" And the Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail" – so he stretched 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." And the Lord furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom" So he put his hand into his bosom and when he took it out, behold his hand was leprous like snow. Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again; and was restored like the rest of his flesh. "And it shall come about that if they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign But it shall be that if they heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

Amen and thus ends this reading of His holy and inspired word. May He add his blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for its truthfulness, for its authority, for the way that it speaks directly to us and to our hearts as we contemplate the redemption that You worked on behalf of Your people. Make us mindful of the redemption that You have accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. Teach us by Your word. Help us by the Spirit to have hearing ears, seeing eyes, that we might behold You, that we might behold Your truth, that we mind respond, that we might be instructed, encouraged and strengthened. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

In tonight's passage we come to Moses third question. Basically, in verse 1 Moses asks the Lord, "What do I do if they don't believe me? What do I do if they don't pay attention to me?" You see what Moses is saying. "What do I do if there is a challenge to my claim to have seen you, to have encountered you, to have received a revelation from you. What do I do if they reject me, if they refuse to

pay attention to me, even though You have appointed me a leader over them?" Moses is facing a challenge as he goes back to the people of God. And the challenge Moses is facing is the people's potential denial that he has really been visited by God. And his fears are well grounded. First of all, remember his own experience. Once before, sensing God's call, he had sought to establish justice in Israel and to protect Israel, and in Exodus 2:14 an Israelite says to him, "Who appointed you judge over me?" Moses already knows what it is to be rejected by Israel. He's a little bit tentative about this. We said last week God appointed a leader, and he asked for a recount. Moses wasn't certain about this. He wasn't certain how the people of God were going to respond to him. But that's not all. There is no indication, friends, there is no indication whatsoever that in the 430 years that Israel had been in Egypt that God had ever manifested Himself to His people. In other words, not since the time of Jacob had God manifested Himself. Not since the time of Jacob had there been a theophany, a manifestation of some sort of a visible, symbolic manifestation of God to His people. Four hundred and thirty years it had been.

You know, sometimes we read the Bible, and in reading the Bible and reading the stories of the miracles in the Bible, get the misconception that during Bible times from the time of Adam to the time of the last apostle. That there were just miracles every day. The fact of the matter is, that is not the case. John the Baptist, for instance, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ Himself says give no miracles. Jesus, on occasions Himself refused to do miracles, though he was a great miracle worker. And in fact if you study the chronology of Old Testament history, it's only in three great outbursts in the history of God's dealing with His people that He does miracles. Miracles were not every day occurrences.

It's difficult for us to even begin to appreciate this fact. We live in the day of television evangelists, and we are inherently skeptical. And so I want to cultivate neither an unbiblical skepticism in you, but at the same time I do want to cultivate in you an appreciation of the fact that miracles were not everyday occurrences in Israel. The people of God, when Moses comes and announces that God has visited him, has visibly manifested Himself to him, may have some very legitimate questions to ask. And the Lord gives Moses three answers to give to the people. Remember that Moses' task here in doing these signs is to convince the people of God. Not yet will Moses' task be to convince Pharaoh. These signs, in fact, will turn out to be convincing for Israel. If you look all the way down to verse 31 in chapter 4, you will see that the response of the people of God to Moses' miracles to these signs and wonders vested to him by God will be that the people of God are convinced. They say, "Yes, we believe you. You are God's man. You are God's spokesman. You are our leader. But if you turn forward to Exodus, chapter 7, and you look at verses 13 and 23, you will see that Pharaoh is not convinced by these things.

Isn't that in and of itself interesting? Same deeds, same signs, same wonders, same miracles. Two results. The people of God believe; those who are not the

people of God do not. It's a standing reminder to us that there is no human instrumentality, nor is there even some sort of a supernatural witness or sign that in and of itself produces belief. The production of belief is the work of God the Holy Spirit in the heart of the human being. And no matter how great the miracle, the miracle in and of itself is incapable of producing conviction and belief. Only God Himself directly does that with the heart. Same miracles, two different results. At any rate, let's look at these three miracles which God gives to Moses as a sign.

First of all, the first sign we'll see in verses 2 through 5. The shepherd's staff transformed into a snake. The second sign we'll see in verses 6 and 7, it's the hand made diseased or leprous and then healed. And then finally in verses 8 and 9, the last sign of the Nile water being turned into blood. Let's look at the first sign.

### **I. God will stretch out His hand against Egypt.**

The first thing to notice in verses 2 through 5 is this. Moses is fearful that Israel will mistrust him. Even though God has already said to him that the elders will trust him. If you look back to Exodus, chapter 3, verse 18, God has given Moses reason to believe that the elders of Israel will respond positively and affirmatively to God's appointing him as the leader of His people and the spokesman to Pharaoh. God has already given Moses that encouragement. And so we may be wondering here, is this a sign of a weakness of Moses' faith? Now, indeed this may be a struggle of faith for Moses to trust in God sending him to His people. But I want to suggest something a little bit different. Do you remember the last time we noted that God had said two things to Moses. First of all God had said to Moses, "The net result of your going to Pharaoh is going to be that I am going to compel him to let the people go." So the end of the story God has already told to Moses. "Moses, the net result is going to be I am going to free My people. And I'm going to compel Pharaoh to do it." So Moses is encouraged that ultimately his venture is going to be a success.

By the way, God does the same for you and me. When He sends us out to bear witness amongst the nations, He promises us that He will redeem His people. It's not even necessarily the effectiveness of our being used as instruments as the final determining factor, but he does promise us success. The Calvinist, the reformed believer, is the one who has supreme confidence in the work of evangelism because God has told us the end of the story. He will redeem His people. It's just our privilege to be used as His instruments in the doing of it. At any rate, God has told Him that much.

Secondly, in Exodus 3:18 God has told Moses that the leaders of Israel will listen to him. They will heed Him. They will acknowledge him. But do you remember that the last time we said, "Now where did God tell Moses the reaction what the

reaction of the people was going to be?" And I wonder if this question of Moses is a reflection of the fact that he had picked up on God's omission. Lord, you told me what's going to happen with Pharaoh, and you told me what's going to happen with the elders of Israel. They're going to listen to me. But what about the people? I've already had some dealings with them. What about them? How are they going to respond to my leadership? And so it may well be that Moses is desiring to learn from God what the response of the people will be to Him. And so he says, "Lord, what if they don't believe me or pay me any attention?" And then God says something very interesting to him. God does not say, Oh Moses, ye of little faith. He doesn't dismiss Moses' question. He immediately goes to the work of giving Moses confirming signs.

This is the first use of human signs, instruments performed by a human in the Bible. And as such, it is very important, because it is very clear that these signs, these miracles are connected with revelation. In other words, God is giving these signs to Moses, not so as to impress people in the abstract, and to convince them to believe in Him savingly, but to confirm the truthfulness of the word that he had spoken to Moses. That is the way miracles will uniformly be used throughout the rest of the Scripture. They are attesting signs. They are confirming signs of the word of God. The word of God is primary, and confirmatory of the word of God.

At any rate, God immediately says this to Moses: What is that in your hand? Now that's a glorious statement because God doesn't need to know what is in Moses' hand. He already knows what is in Moses' hand. But Moses, and the people of God need to be reminded of something. By asking Moses what is in your hand, he is confirming as Moses writes it down and as Moses retells it to the people of God, that all that Moses has in his hand is an ordinary staff. This isn't a secret voodoo stick. This isn't a mighty powerful something or other. It's just a staff. It's a shepherd's staff, and God wants Moses to say it out loud. And he does. "Well, Lord, it's a rod." Just like the one that David talks about in Psalm 23 verse 4, it's the rod, the staff that comforts him. It's a shepherd's staff. That's all it is. There's nothing magical, supernatural or powerful about that staff that's important to know. Because God is going to use that very ordinary staff to conquer Egypt. God asks Moses, what is in your hand, in order to confirm that that staff is ordinary, and then God tells him to throw the staff on the ground, and suddenly the staff transforms itself into a serpent; or God, by His own might, transforms the staff into a serpent. And Moses flees away. Now you just learned something else. Moses is not a trickster. Moses is scared to death of the serpent on the ground. He throws the staff down, it turns into a snake, and he beats it, like any normal human being with an inkling of sense. In other words, God is telling you that Moses is not a magician.

You see the people of God lived in a culture in Egypt where magic was rife. Egyptian magicians did these kind of tricks. Egyptians believed in these kind of methodology and magic. And God is confirming to you that His leader is no

magician. He doesn't have a magic wand, and he doesn't have some sort of secret powers. In fact, he's scared to death when the thing turns into a snake. And then, God does something else very interesting. He tells Moses to take the snake by the tail. Now once again no sane person would do this. We have every reason to believe that this is a cobra. That this snake is, in fact, symbolic of the cobra goddess of lower Egypt. This snake is a killer. It was chosen by the Egyptians as a sign of power, as a menacing sign of power to their enemies, precisely because of its own dangerousness. And now God tells Moses to take the snake by the tail. If you were going to try and grab this snake, certainly you would try and grab it as close as you could behind the head at the top of the neck so that it couldn't strike, but you never would have taken it by the tail. The snake is a representative of Egyptian sovereignty, just as the staff of authority in Egypt, so also the snake is a symbol of sovereignty. The staff in Egypt, as in many cultures, is a figure of royal power. It is a symbol of authority and leadership and power, and God now takes this shepherd's staff, and He gives it to Moses, and He is going to use it to destroy the power and authority of Egypt. The snake, too, is a symbol of Egyptian sovereignty. The ruler often wore a coiled snake on his headdress. This coiled snake was symbolic of the cobra goddess of lower Egypt, a menacing symbol of death to all her enemies. But that's not all.

One other thing that you notice here in verse 4. Notice the repetition of this phrase. The Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand." Now that's not the first time you've heard that phrase. God Himself has said He will stretch out His hand, and He will free Israel from Egypt. Now Moses is to follow His Lord and Master's example, and to stretch out his hand and take the snake by the tail. Later, Pharaoh will stretch out his hand and free Israel. God again is showing us His sovereignty over Egypt. God will stretch out His hand against Egypt. In transforming the rod into a snake, Moses is doing actually what Egyptians and magicians who do tricks of slight of hand could only dream of doing. His people have been surrounded by this magical culture. They have seen these kinds of feats done. Now God is going to really do it, but even more.

Pull back and think: You've been a slave in Egypt for four hundred and something years. Perhaps you have seen taskmasters with a coiled snake of lower Egypt around their arm or on their head. You have seen magicians with their staffs do these kinds of conjuring tricks and slight of hand. And now God sends you His own messenger. And by the very signs of the power and authority of Egypt, he manifests your God's sovereignty over Egypt. Wouldn't that be an encouragement to you? Do you see how these signs are not just about doing something spectacular and spooky and miraculous. These signs speak to deep truths and realities about the experience of the people of God. They have been oppressed by Egypt, and God is now, through the sign of the shepherd's staff transformed into a snake, showing that He, the God of Israel, is sovereign over Egypt. Listen to what the Jewish commentary on these verses says. Here the signs which will be executed in Egypt possess a distinctly Egyptian coloration. This is not surprising, for magic was a pervasive ingredient of everyday life in

Egypt, deeply imbedded in the culture. The signs taught to Moses are intended first and foremost to validate his claim to be the divinely chosen instrument for the redemption of Israel. On a secondary level, they also function to establish the superiority of Moses over the Egyptian magicians. And by extension to affirm the superior might of Israel's God over those whom the Egyptian's worshiped as gods. Moses, however, is not a magician. He possesses no super human powers. No esoteric knowledge. He is unable to initiate or perform anything except by the precise instructions of God. He pronounces no spells, he observes no rituals, he employs no occult techniques, and often he does not know in advance the consequences of the actions he is told to perform. What a difference.

Do you remember in the days of Joseph, and in the days of Daniel when they interpret dreams, as often happened in the culture around them, they stressed that it was God who revealed to them the meaning of the dreams. They were not like the conjurers, the sorcerers, the seers, the prophets, of the people around them. Moses' actions indicate that he's not a magician like the magicians of the Egyptians. He doesn't know what is going to happen when he sticks his hand inside his coat and pulls it out diseased. He doesn't know what's going to happen when he puts it back in again. He doesn't know what's going to happen when he throws the rod on the ground, and it turns into a snake. He doesn't know what's going to happen when he takes the water of the Nile and pours it on the ground. All he is doing is the bidding of God. Do you see the first sign of a prophet of God? He does not have in and of himself power. He does not have in and of himself a word. He is given power, he is given the word, and he speaks, and he does only that which God gives him. Oh, how different that is, how different that is from the tricksters and the hucksters of Moses' day and ours. A prophet with a word from God and with power from God. That's the first thing we see. God's stretching out His hand against Egypt and giving Moses this sign of the shepherd's staff transformed.

## **II. God will act through this man Moses**

Quickly and secondly, in verses 6 and 7 we see a second sign. The Lord furthermore said, "'Put your hand into your bosom.' And he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out his hand was leprous like snow.'" We don't know exactly how we're supposed to translate that word. There are different words used for various kinds of skin diseases in the plentitude. And we don't know exactly what kind of skin disease this is. Most commentators today think that it's very likely that this is not Hanson's Disease or as we say commonly, leprosy. That it's some other kind of skin disease, and that the reference to 'snow' here is actually not a reference to it being white, but a reference to it being flaky, like snow. Whatever the case is, clearly Moses doesn't know what is going to happen when he slips his hand inside the coat and pulls it out. But God, by bringing on this incurable disease and by instantaneously curing it, is pointing to the fact that

He has chosen this man, Moses, to be His spokesman. God will act through this man Moses to speak to Pharaoh and to lead His people. Moses is God's choice for His people. Skin diseases like leprosy and other diseases mentioned in Leviticus, for instance, were often incurable, and often they set you apart from the rest of society, where you couldn't have any part. Can you imagine, one of the rules for leprosy was never to allow diseased skin to come into contact with skin which was not diseased. And here he is taking this diseased hand and placing it back to the very heart of his hearts. And God again is showing His sovereignty over man. And He is identifying Moses as His chosen one in the second sign.

### **III. God is sovereign over the life-giver of Egypt.**

And finally in verses 8 and 9 He gives this last sign of the Nile water turned into blood, and it reminds us that God is sovereign over the life giver of Egypt. The Nile, in ancient writing, both Egyptian and non-Egyptian, is identified closely with Egypt. It's the thing that you think about when you think about Egypt. It was even called the life giver of Egypt. It was even called Egypt. The Nile is Egypt. The Nile brings Egypt to life. The Nile is the life giver of Egypt, ancient writers said. And by performing this sign of taking the Nile water and turning it to blood, God is showing His sovereignty over that which is most distinctive and essential to life in Egypt. And by the way, He is giving you a little foretaste of the first of the plagues. Moses, in order to convince the people of God that he was God's prophet for them and to them, does a miniature version of the first plague which God will visit against Egypt.

In all of these things, especially in the first and the last sign, God is reiterating to His people that He is sovereign over Egypt. You realize again that it's not just Moses performing these curious and almost bizarre signs that in and of themselves are convincing and compelling to the people of God. It's their realization of what the signs indicate. These signs indicate their God's sovereignty over their enemies. God, in His plan of redemption, is sovereign over all the enemies of His people. That's something for us to rejoice in tonight. Not just applying this to our personal challenges, but remembering the great challenge that we are all up against because we struggle not with flesh and blood, but with powers and principalities. And God in this passage tonight is reminding us again that He is sovereign over all of those. We're no match for them, but God is sovereign. He has chosen His man. He will redeem His people, and He will reveal Himself, not only to His own people, but even to the enemies of His people. May God be praised. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before Your wisdom and Your might. We glory in the story of Your deeds of old, and we look forward to the revelation of Your future glory and grace in Jesus Christ, looking to the blessed hope of His coming, waiting in hope, trusting always, give us the strength to, in Jesus' name, Amen.



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