

Exodus 4: Identity and Transformation

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“Then Moses answered and said, ‘But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’” So the LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A rod.” And He said, “Cast it on the ground.” So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out your hand and take it by the tail” (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand)...”

Exodus 4:1-4

Chapter 4 of Exodus continues the account of Moses' first encounter with God. This encounter is not only significant for the life of Moses and the children of Israel more broadly, but it remains significant today for all believers in the true and living God. The reason for this, which we touched on last week, has to do with Moses' unique relationship with God:

“Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were not dim nor his natural vigor diminished. And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. So the days of weeping and mourning for Moses ended. Now Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face...”

-Deuteronomy 34:7-10

Moses is unique in the Old Covenant not primarily because of the signs that God worked through him, because the future prophets exhibited similar signs, nor because of the salvation that God worked through Moses, since future prophets and kings also delivered the people of Israel from slavery and bondage, but he is primarily remembered because of the unique intimacy that Moses had with God. Because of this, it is through the life of Moses, and his unique encounters with God that we are given a fuller expression of God's nature.

This chapter is no different. Even though the chapter begins with Moses' doubting, God is using this interaction, and even the failures of Moses to demonstrate His own power and character to His people. Take this interesting verse from Exodus 7 to see how God

is using these circumstances to glorify Himself and show His nature and power to His people:

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.”

-Exodus 7:3

So, even though this chapter begins with Moses’ doubts, the context and the effect of this chapter is that we learn more about the essence of our God.

Repetition in Symbols

God accomplishes this goal by giving Moses three different signs to show the Israelites, as well as the Egyptians. First, he is told to cast his staff on the ground, at which point it becomes a serpent and then returns to being a staff when Moses grabs it by the tail. Then Moses places his hand in his cloak and when he brings it back out it is diseased, and then he is allowed to “heal” his hand by placing it back in his cloak. Finally, though he isn’t able to test this sign in the middle of the wilderness, he is told that he can pour the water of the Nile out onto the ground and it will become blood.

The first thing that we have to recognize about these signs is that they are not arbitrary. It is easy for us to blow past these signs and just assume that God is giving Moses the ability to do random extraordinary things in order to impress the Israelites and the Egyptians, but this isn’t true. While these signs are meant to induce wonder, they are also meant to communicate specific things, which we will explore later on.

Also, although these signs are technically different, they are actually all revealing the same message, though through different symbols. This is a common pattern in the Scriptures, as well as through literature, that acts as an aid for the reader to get a more full understanding of what is being communicated. As we have talked about before, God uses symbols to communicate His nature to us, not because He delights in being ambiguous, but because His nature is beyond our comprehension. As such, God has to communicate His nature to us through symbols so that we can ponder the symbols and then slowly learn about God through them.

However, since this process is admittedly vague and complex, God will, every now and then, repeat a symbol in a different form in order to make the point more clear. Take Jesus’ parables as an example of this. In Luke 15 Jesus teaches three separate parables. The first is about a lost sheep, the second is about a lost coin, and the third, which is the most popular, tells the story of a son who turns to a lifestyle of prodigality.

Even though these stories are all different, we can read them in succession without being confused. Why? Because they all carry the same meaning. To simplify that meaning here, these stories all convey to us how God sees the lost soul. He is not frustrated or wrathful towards the one who is lost, but like the good shepherd who leaves the 99 to go after the 1, or the woman who searches her house to find the missing coin, or the good father who delights to see his son return:

“I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

-Luke 15:7

We can also understand this as the reason why the Bible sometimes repeats “books”. In the Old Testament, there are the books of first and second Kings, but later on, we also have the books of first and second Chronicles which, more or less, tell the same stories. In the New Testament we have the four different gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But the obvious question we can ask is why? Why not just have one gospel account that all the apostles write collectively, why do we need four different accounts?

The reason is exactly the point we have been discussing. By giving us four different vantage points to see the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, we are able to more clearly understand His teachings and His signs by seeing different ways of representing the same events. This same technique is employed in stories, more specifically in fairy tales. Since most of the fairy tales that we know were created by Christians, an event will repeat itself three times in order for the audience to understand the message. For instance in Snow White, the original Grimm’s brother’s account, not the more modern versions, the evil queen actually tempts Snow White three separate times. The first she presents her with ribbons, the second with a comb, and the third with the poisoned apple.

In the first two instances she is rendered unconscious but is able to be awakened by the dwarves when they remove the ribbons or the comb, but the third temptation is beyond their power since the apple is consumed by Snow White and can’t be taken out, only the prince is later able to save her. Once again, without getting too much into the complex symbolism, by repeating the temptation three times we can see more clearly what the temptation actually is. The main theme of the story is the dangers of vanity, as exhibited by the evil queen, and so she tempts Snow White to become just as vain as she is with three temptations of beauty, each with the promise that she will become more appealing to men, but each making her unconscious. This reflects the type of unconsciousness

that is created in a woman consumed with her own vanity and ignorant to the love that is around her.

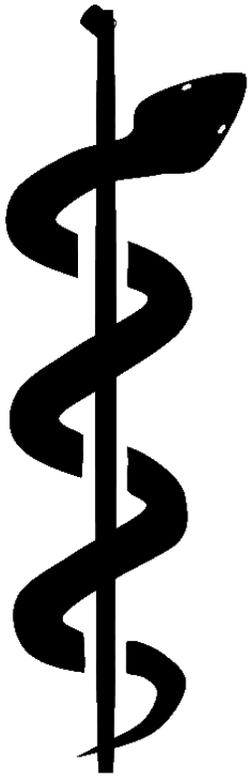
And so, even though Moses is given three different signs, they are actually the same symbol repeated three times in a different format. Furthermore, each sign is a representation of God's nature and the paradoxical way that He sets His people free.

The Staff and the Serpent

The main disadvantage we have in trying to interpret these three signs is the massive difference between our culture and the culture of Moses and the Egyptians. The signs that God gives are supposed to convey His nature to the specific people at this specific time. This doesn't mean these symbols are not for us today, but it does mean that in order to understand these signs, we have to approach them from the perspective of Moses and the Israelites.

Since the latter two signs, the hand becoming diseased and then healthy and the water becoming blood, seem more straightforward it would be pretty simple for a modern person to interpret the sign of the rod that becomes a serpent through the lens of the latter two signs. If we did that, we would get a fairly straightforward interpretation. The latter two signs seem to convey God's power to produce death and life, and so it would make sense that the rod becoming a serpent would represent the same thing, a dead branch becoming a living thing, otherwise an instrument of life becoming a deadly serpent.

While this interpretation is not technically wrong, we will talk more about this later, it is missing something crucial that an ancient person would not miss. Even though the first sign seems most obscure to us, this would have actually been the most obvious sign to an ancient person. This sign is not only one of the oldest symbols in the world, but it is a universal symbol found around the world. To give two examples from ancient Greece, here is a depiction of the rod of Asclepius, shown as a single serpent coiled around a staff, as well as the staff of the god Hermes, shown as a single rod with two serpents coiled around it, called a "Caduceus":



For reasons that we will discuss more later, these two signs are often used as symbols of healing by various medical organizations around the world. Which, off the bat, should strike us as odd, why would a snake be used in a symbol about healing? Again more on that later, this is merely to introduce us to the nature of this sign. Here also is a picture of a crown, called a “Uraeus”, worn by the ancient Pharaohs of Egypt:



Notice that the crown depicts a coiled cobra raising itself up to represent lower Egypt, and this serpent turns into a vulture to represent upper Egypt. Although this might not seem to be the same symbol, it actually is. The Pharaoh himself represents the rod, or the staff, and the serpent is coiled “around” his head. But, even more strange is how much this symbol appears in the Bible. Here is a depiction of Satan tempting Eve in the garden of Eden:



Notice how the artist depicts Satan coiled around the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Later on in the book of Numbers, God sends serpents to bite His people as a consequence of their complaints against Him, and after they repent we are told this:

“Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”

-Numbers 21:7-9

Below is an artist’s representation of what this bronze serpent might have looked like:



Once again, we have this strange imagery of a snake and a staff. I actually really like that the artist depicts this staff as a type of cross, since Jesus also uses this symbol to explain His own ministry:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

-John 3:14-16

But, what does this symbol mean, and why does it show up all around the world as well as throughout Scripture? While this is a very complex question, for the purposes of this paper I will try my best to break down these elements as simply as I can. For the ancient person, the staff, or the rod, was a picture of identity, stability, protection, and, most importantly, tradition. When we think about these elements, they will hopefully make sense.

First, the staff was usually taken from a branch of a tree, though some of the scepters that kings used were usually made out of gold and adorned with precious stones. However, the original staff would have been made from a tree, which would have been hugely significant to the ancient person. After all, trees precede all of us. They are considered ancient and are tied to the land that we are living on in ways that we are not, since they are rooted deep into the earth and provide food and shade the environment that they live in.

This means that when a person takes a branch from the tree, usually when they are older in age, they are taking a part of the deep history of that land, hence the association with heaven. Also, when someone uses a walking stick for a prolonged period of time, it almost becomes a third appendage. They use the staff as an extension of themselves, to balance themselves and even as a weapon to ward off predators. And as someone uses it, it begins to take on weather and age in the same way that they do.

It is for these reasons why it wouldn't be strange to the ancient person that Moses performed his miracles "through" his staff. In much the same way that a wizard uses a wand to perform his magic, or even how J.R.R. Tolkien depicts his wizards using their staffs to perform their magic.

The snake on the other hand, represents many of the same things, yet in a different way. As you can hopefully see from the rod of Asclepius or the crown of the Pharaoh, the ancient person did not view serpents as pure agents of death and destruction, but instead gave them a more nuanced view. Yes, snakes possess deadly venom and should be treated with caution, but they are also seen as being shrewd since they have to navigate a dangerous world on their bellies, and they are also associated with renewal. Snakes uniquely can renew themselves through shedding their skin and so they are often used to symbolize cycles of transformation or change in general. But since they are also associated with death, we can see that the ancients viewed change with a level of respect and caution.

When we put all this together, the symbol hopefully begins to make a lot more sense. The rod, being strong and associated with identity and power, reveals God to be stable, unified, solid, powerful, and majestic. However, any identity that is solid and immovable becomes tyrannical, think about the tower of Babel as the symbol of a "staff" that becomes oppressive. But our God is also One who can effectuate real change and transformation, after all He is the living God. This is why Moses' staff, though solid and stable, can transform into a serpent, but it can also effectuate change by splitting the Red Sea or call forth the various plagues of Egypt.

This is also why God later reveals Himself as a pillar of fire and cloud to lead His people. The pillar is the same symbol of the staff, but the fact that it is constituted of fire and cloud, two substances that are seemingly alive and beyond our control, reveals this same symbol of solidity and transformation. But now that we have the basic outline of this symbol, let's delve into the ways that God uses this symbol in this chapter.

Identity and Transformation

“And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses’ feet, and said, “Surely you are a husband of blood to me!” So He let him go. Then she said, “You are a husband of blood!”—because of the circumcision.”
-Exodus 4:24-26

As stated before there are many relevant ways to take this symbol, and as it shows up throughout the Bible we will certainly cover the different dimensions, but in this chapter, the symbol in view is identity and transformation. The part of the story that I quoted above I believe captures this most clearly. When people read through Exodus 4, this part of the story seems to come out of nowhere and add nothing to the overall narrative. To such an extent, that many have theorized that we are missing some of the relevant text to understand these events.

I actually disagree. I believe that this part of the story perfectly coincides with the other symbols that God has used to express His nature and intentions. As stated before, one of the primary ways to understand the staff in this symbol is as the rod of tradition, or the rod of identity. But, since the rod is made out of dead wood, it needs a transformative element to keep it from decaying or becoming tyrannical. However, the transformative element that God introduces is also a mechanism of death. This same symbol shows up when God commands Moses to bring his hand into his cloak making it diseased, and then back into his cloak to make it well.

Once again, the hand of Moses is a part of his identity that is transformed by disease and then miraculously healed. I think that the biggest clue that we get about God’s intent is actually when He tells Moses that he can take the water of the Nile, which represents life and vitality, and turn it into blood on dry land, once again a symbol of death and decay. The reason why this is a good hint into God’s intentions is because the Nile, which is again the main symbol of prosperity for the Egyptian people, has been used to drown the infant boys of Israel.

What these symbols show are the connection between life and death, and further they show us that God is the One who has command of life and death:

“Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.”
-Deuteronomy 32:39

But more than God demonstrating His power, He is showing the terrible cost of true transformation. When an identity becomes corrupt and destructive, the only hope of saving it is to introduce a small amount of death in order to transform it. This might sound strange, but there is a reason why ancient, and modern people groups have used the image of the staff and the serpent to symbolize medicine. And I think a good way to understand this symbol deeper, medicinal intervention will serve as a useful metaphor.

If I were to be bitten by a rattlesnake, how would a doctor treat me? He would introduce venom into a healthy animal in order to produce antibodies that fight against the effects of the venom and then introduce this “antivenom” into my body. This symbol is clearly shown in the book of Numbers when God specifically has His people look at an image of a snake in order to be healed from snake venom. This is the whole principle behind medicine. If someone’s bodily health, or their bodily “identity” has become compromised, drastic interventions become necessary. And these interventions use directed forms of harm in order to create a cure.

This same principle is active when we try to help someone spiritually, or as modern people would put it, psychologically. Take PTSD for instance. The identity of the person has become corrupted due to a past trauma. In order to treat the trauma, we have to reintroduce the traumatic event, through therapy, in order to re-integrate that event in a non-destructive way. But this is true for marital counseling. A couple’s identity is threatened due to a major disagreement, a form of betrayal, or a long standing destructive pattern. The only way to “heal” the couple is to actually confront the underlying issue and try work through that problem. In other words, we can’t ignore the problem, but must face a form of “deadly” transformation in order to heal.

The reason why these more extreme methods should be used with caution, is because we are trying to use something harmful in order to help. This means that there is a chance that our attempts to make things better might actually make things worse. While there is much to say on that, let’s focus on what this has to do with Moses and circumcision. The “trauma” in Moses’ past, the very one that made him an exile, was being rejected by his people. This rejection made Moses not only leave Egypt, but it has also seemingly caused him to leave behind his Jewish identity. This is why Moses has failed to circumcise his children. In order to heal Moses, God has called him back to his people, but on the way, Moses is assaulted by an angel. This assault is only taken away by the faithfulness of his wife. But she accomplishes this only by harming her own children.

Once again, the same symbol. A corrupted identity that threatens Moses' life is only healed through an introduction of harm to his family. This shouldn't really surprise us

because this is exactly how the gospel works, and why Jesus associated Himself with the symbol of the rod and the snake found in the book of Numbers:

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

-2 Corinthians 5:21

The identity of man is made dead and corrupt through our sin. In order for Christ to heal us, He has to take on the penalty for our sin, that we might receive the righteousness of God. It is very much a symbol of antivenom. Christ enters into death and decay, but by overcoming these things, He has made a way for us to also be raised to new life through Him. This is Christ “trampling down death by death.” In other words, the mystery of Christ is defeating death by dying. Just as the mystery of medicine is defeating death by using directed harm.

Resisting the Call of God

“Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send.”

-Exodus 4:12-13

However, Moses refuses the call of transformation from his God. While we are not directly told what Moses’ motivations for refusal might have been, though he does offer half hearted excuses to cover over his anxieties, comparing Moses’ story to other prophets and heroes might help us out.

Before I get to the prophets, I wanted to point out that this is a universal trope in storytelling, the hero of the story almost always resists the initial call to adventure. Whether we are talking about Frodo from “The Lord of the Rings” to Neo from “The Matrix”, the initial call of the hero will almost always be resisted. Why? Partly to show the humility of the hero, but mostly it is to show the difficulty of the upward call of God. As God is trying to show Moses in this story, He is not calling him to a life of ease and comfort. Although God is calling Moses to the virtuous life and the blessed life that can only be experienced in fellowship with Him, he is also calling Moses to risk everything, to confront a dangerous tyrant, and to leave the comfort of his own home in order to face extreme danger.

While Moses in his youth saw clearly the need to rise up against those in power, the Moses in his old age now has a wife and kids, he has a whole life that he doesn’t want to threaten with this extreme call to adventure. This is the nature of reality. The call of

God, though it will always be amazing and will always lead to great long term benefit is also scary and requires much sacrifice and discipline. This is why God has Moses cast down his rod of stability and it becomes a snake that he must grab by the tail. He has to lose his life to find it, he has to confront danger and death in order to find life everlasting. This is why C.S. Lewis once said about courage:

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality.”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Screwtape Letters”

We see this same thing for the prophet Jeremiah early in his own ministry. When he is first called he objects that he is afraid to speak up due to his youth, but later on in his ministry he finds a new fear that he must overcome:

“O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, “Violence and plunder!” Because the word of the LORD was made to me A reproach and a derision daily. Then I said, “I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name.” But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not.”

-Jeremiah 20:7-9

Jeremiah’s real resistance came from a fear of rejection. He knew the powerful message that God was intending and he also knew the culture that he was a part of. Experiencing the resistance of the culture made him shy away from trying. Moses has already tried to free the Israelites and has been rejected. Fearing the same rejection may be a powerful motivation for him not speaking out.

The Cost of Transformation

The other option comes from prophets like Habakkuk and, to some extent, the apostles of Christ.

“Are You not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours A person more righteous than he?”

-Habakkuk 1:12-13

To give a little context for this quote, Habakkuk begins his book by asking God to judge the evil happening in Israel. God responds by telling His prophet that He will indeed intervene, but this intervention will take the form of a pagan nation destroying Israel and displacing them from the land. Habakkuk is incensed at this proposition, seemingly, because the nation that would judge Israel was more wicked than Israel itself. But beneath this complaint is something else. Habakkuk was viewing his nation as only partially wrong. He saw some corruption at the top that he felt needed to be weeded out, but he didn't think that a correction of this magnitude was necessary.

God however sees reality differently than we do. God saw that the corruption of Israel wasn't relegated to a few elites, instead God saw the entire nation as mired in corruption and evil, and in order to cleanse it from unrighteousness, He needed an extremely invasive operation. This is very similar to the attitude of Christ's disciples. During the week of His crucifixion, Christ appeals one more time to the religious authorities to get them to repent, but far from repenting, they then conspire to kill Him. In order to console Him we are told:

"Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

-Matthew 24:1-2

Like Habakkuk, the apostles believed that the religious leaders were corrupt, but they still had hope for the system itself. They really believed that Christ was there only to reform the temple system and take over as the religious and political leader of Israel, they had no clue that the condition of mankind was so bad that the Messiah needed to die in order to save the world.

We can look at Moses in the same way. He was willing to reform Egypt in his position as a prince within Egypt, but to judge Egypt, to fully and unambiguously embrace his Jewish identity and seek to lead the people out of Egypt, this would come as a most unwelcome surprise. Beyond that, God has now foreshadowed numerous times His overall plan to judge Egypt, even to kill the firstborn sons of Egypt, numerous times now:

"And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD:

“Israel is My son, My firstborn. “So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.” ’ ’ ”

-Exodus 4:21-23

Hearing this would be like going to the doctor to receive a basic medication for a cold, only to be told that you need to go into surgery to remove a tumor in your lungs. You can look at the signs that God gives Moses in the same light. God is telling Moses that transformation is coming, but things will get a lot worse before they get any better. And the fate awaiting Egypt is also implicit in these signs. Notice that the first two signs follow a common formula that magicians use in their acts. The first “act” of a trick is to take something ordinary and display it, like the staff or the hand. The next act is to make this ordinary object transform, like the rod becoming a snake or the hand becoming diseased. The final act is to reconstitute the original form.

However, while Moses, representing the Israelites, undergoes a transformation that is reconstituted, the miracle that pertains to the Egyptians, the transformation of the Nile water to blood, is not brought back to water, but is instead poured out as blood, and remains blood. The implicit message is that the transformation that God intends will ultimately benefit the Israelites, but will be ultimately destructive for Egypt. This makes sense since Egypt represents the flesh, and Israel represents the spirit, since Egypt is pagan and run by corruption and lust, while Israel is led by God in this story. In order for the life of the spirit to grow in an individual, they must suffer great sacrifice in the flesh. This type of message is at the basis of repentance and transformation in the Christian life:

“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”

-2 Corinthians 7:10-11

In order for us to be saved from ourselves we must first reach the point where we mourn correctly for our wrong behavior. We must attain “godly sorrow”. Just like the snake raised up in the wilderness, or Christ upon the cross, before we can be healed, we must first look fully upon our sin and recognize our need for salvation. For many people, the reason why they never find true transformation in their life is because they are unwilling to reckon with their deep need for it.

Take diets for an example. According to the last study that I could find, something like 95 percent of people who go on a diet will gain all the weight they lost back within two years of starting the diet. Why? The attitude that most bring to the diet is that they have a weight problem, what they aren't willing to admit is that they have an overall problem with how they view food and health. So even though these diets and supplements can reduce the weight of someone, they can't touch the deeper, underlying problem. But when push comes to shove, reality reasserts itself and the weight comes back.

Let's take a more extreme example, addiction. Although I don't agree with everything in AA, I do believe that there is a lot of relevant wisdom in their writings. Take the first of the twelve steps for example:

"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable."

According to this step, someone who is truly addicted to alcohol can't even begin their journey of sobriety until they reckon with the fact that they are "*powerless over alcohol*". If a person is only willing to admit that they need to "cut back" on drinking, or change up certain habits, they haven't really seen the true problems contained in their character, and therefore will never find true repentance or transformation. I like how "The Big Book" puts this point:

"Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt. So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible."

-"The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous"

Notice, it isn't alcohol that is "*the root of our troubles*." But selfishness and self-centeredness, the abuse of alcohol is merely an expression of this overall iniquity within the soul. And if it didn't manifest in alcoholism, it would manifest in another way. It is only when someone is able to reckon with the full depth of their sin, only when they acknowledge in humility their great need for transformation that they can finally receive it. As Christ Himself puts it:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

-John 12:24-25

This is the mystery that God is communicating to Moses, the rod has to become a snake in order to become the rod again, the hand must be diseased in order to be healed, the Nile must be “killed” to stop it from being the source of infanticide, and his children must receive a painful symbol in their flesh in order to be apart of God’s nation. Sacrifice will always be the road to healing, and death will always be the prerequisite for life everlasting. And it is only when we have the courage to grasp that transformation by the “tail”, and trust in the God who is in control of that transformation, that we can find healing. Without the courage to do so, we will remain in our cycles of death and destruction.

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; “that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.”

-Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Transformation Begins With Praise

“Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel. And Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. Then he did the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped.”

-Exodus 4:29-31

To end this paper on a more positive note though, how is it that we are moved to understand the necessity of change? For some, they feel as though this happens only through a true understanding of the vastness of their sin, but this isn’t true:

“Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

-Romans 5:20-21

The law is necessary to show us the gravity of our offense, but transformation only comes to the person who sees that the grace of God exceeds their offense. The people of Israel have already cried out for salvation, meaning that they already know how desperate their situation is and how great their need is for salvation. But this alone is not enough to bring them to salvation, it is only when they witness the power of God that they are ready to be set free, and the correct response that they give to the signs is worship.

To worship is to render praise to something in accordance with its worth, hence the old English conjunction that makes up our modern word “worth-ship”. When the Israelites begin praising God, which is the first time they have done this in the book of Exodus, it shows that they have come to see God as more powerful than their bondage, and that God’s grace is more significant than their troubles.

The person who only sees the goodness of God without seeing their need for Him has not yet called upon God for salvation. But the person who only sees the power of their bondage without seeing the goodness of God has no hope that they can be saved. The only person who is ready for salvation is the person who has seen both the power of their sin and the glory of God’s grace that surmounts their sin. This is why true repentance and transformation will always begin with humble sorrow followed by sincere praise. Let’s end this study with a quote on repentance from the preacher Charles Spurgeon.

“True repentance has a distinct and constant reference to the Lord, Jesus Christ. If you repent of sin without looking to Christ, away with your repentance! If you are so lamenting your sin as to forget the Savior, you have need to begin all this work over again. Whenever we repent of sin we must have one eye upon sin and another upon the Cross. Or, better still, let us have both eyes upon Christ, seeing our sin punished in Him and by no means let us look at sin except as we look at Jesus. A man may hate sin just as a murderer hates the gallows – but this does not prove repentance. If I hate sin because of the punishment, I have not repented of sin – I merely regret that God is just. But if I can see sin as an offense against Jesus Christ and loathe myself because I have wounded Him, then I have a true brokenness of heart. If I see the Savior and believe that those thorns upon His head were plaited by my sinful words; If I believe that those wounds in His heart were pierced by my heart sins; If I believe that those wounds in His feet were made by my wandering steps and that the wounds in His hands were made by my sinful deeds – then I repent of sin after a right fashion. Only under the Cross can you repent. Repentance elsewhere is remorse which clings to the sin and only dreads the punishment. Let us then seek, under God, to have a hatred of sin caused by a sight of Christ’s love.”

-Charles Spurgeon