

The Name of God

By
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“Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD 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 this is My memorial to all generations.’”

-Exodus 3:13-15

As we continue our study in the book of Exodus we have now come to the moment where God calls Moses to free the children of Israel from bondage. These couple chapters where Moses interacts with God are not only significant to us because they show us narratively how Moses begins his ministry to the nation of Israel, but even more importantly because it is the moment when God reveals Himself to Moses by giving him His name.

As we talked about in the last study, the main reason why Moses prefigures Christ is because of the way he interacted with God. Where the previous patriarchs mentioned to us in the book of Genesis had relationships with God and encountered Him at various times within their lives, we are told of Moses that:

“So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”

-Exodus 33:11

When it says that God spoke to Moses “face to face” this is not to suggest that God has a physical face, but instead to convey to us that Moses did not merely know *about* God, but instead that he *knew* God personally and intimately. It is this level of intimacy that is conveyed in Moses’ encounter with God in the wilderness. On a narrative level it is important to remember that this is the first time in the Bible that God has given an answer to someone when they asked His name. In fact even after Jacob wrestles with God and receives a blessing from Him, this is what happens when Jacob asks God for His name:

“Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

-Genesis 32:29-30

Remember for ancient man, someone’s “name” is not merely a title that parents arbitrarily gave them, a “name” refers to someone’s character or essence. Even in our modern culture we have somewhat retained this idea in phrases like: “I’m protecting my good name”. So when God doesn’t give His name to people, this isn’t a rejection of the question, but it is instead God conveying something about His identity. That God has “a name above every name...” Philippians 2:9. Or to put it another way, that the essence of God’s identity is too great for us to directly comprehend. This is why Christ is described this way when He returns to judge the earth:

“His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself.”

-Revelation 19:12

These passages are not saying that there is some arbitrary “name” written on Christ’s thigh that is beyond our ability to pronounce or something like that, but that the fullness of Christ’s identity is too great for anyone to know except Himself. The reason why all of this is so important is because we are told in Scripture that:

“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

-John 17:3

The basis of eternal life is not about sensual pleasure or even just freedom from pain and suffering, but instead true beatitude, true bliss and wonder are bound up in *knowing* God. That in this simple act resides all the pleasures of heaven and constitutes the primary purpose of human existence. So in this short chapter hopefully we can learn more of what it means to know God and to discover at a deeper level more of His ineffable character and identity.

The Revealed God

“To whom then will you liken Me, Or to whom shall I be equal?” says the Holy One.”

-Isaiah 40:25

However, if we follow the logic of my previous statements, if God really is beyond comprehension, and His nature beyond comparison, then is it really possible to know God's name? This might sound like an odd question, but this concept has legitimately been debated amongst followers of God for millenia.

This has even spawned a type of theology called "apophatic" theology, which declares that we can only approach God only by learning what He isn't, and never approach Him by what He is. I believe this instinct is alive and well in our culture today where we have a growing number of younger people who are "agnostic". While true atheism is still rare in our increasingly materialistic world, there are many people who feel as though, if there is a God, that such a God would clearly be far beyond our understanding. And perhaps, that most of the world's problems have been created by foolish and short-sighted people who tried to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Without delving too deep into the nature of this complex debate, for the sake of this study let's simply look at how Moses draws near to God:

"Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn."

-Exodus 3:1-3

We are told in this passage that Moses, now an old man, was simply tending the flock of his father in-law when God *revealed* Himself to him. The mistake that we can make is that since God is beyond our total comprehension this means that we can't know Him at all. Further, this means that the only way a person can come to know God is if He reveals Himself to us. This concept, and specifically this exact story, is what motivated the great Christian thinker Blaise Pascal in the mid 1600's. During this time, the scientific revolution and the enlightenment were in full swing and men began to believe that all mysteries would be solved and all secrets revealed by their mastery of this new investigative practice. This idea began to even permeate Christianity where many well meaning Christians began to believe that they could "know" God perfectly by dissecting both nature and Scripture alike.

It was in the grip of this idea that Pascal began to question the validity of these all too tempting ideas. And what He began to realize is that God is not a concept to be understood, but a person to be *known*. And one can not get to know a person through

investigation, only through interaction and experience. Pascal had such an experience in the middle of his life that he detailed on a piece of paper and then sewed that paper in the lining of one of his jackets. After his death this paper was discovered and published, the text of what he wrote follows:

*“The year of grace 1654,
Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the
martyrology.
Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others.
From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,
FIRE.
GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob
not of the philosophers and of the learned.
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
GOD of Jesus Christ.
My God and your God.
Your GOD will be my God.
Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.
He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel.
Grandeur of the human soul.
Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.
I have departed from him:
They have forsaken me, the fount of living water.
My God, will you leave me?
Let me not be separated from him forever.
This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent,
Jesus Christ.
Jesus Christ.
Jesus Christ.
I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified.
Let me never be separated from him.
He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel:
Renunciation, total and sweet.
Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.
Eternally in joy for a day’s exercise on the earth.
May I not forget your words. Amen.”
-Blaise Pascal*

Even though this is something that he wrote in the moment and is simply a recording of his experience and not a thought out explanation of what he experienced, you can still pull from it his overall point as well as the many allusions to Moses encountering God in the wilderness. By beginning his statements with the word "FIRE" he is pulling from this account where God reveals Himself to Moses through a fire, because a fire is not something to be understood, but experienced. And even though he was a man of great intellect he declares that this is the God: "...not of the philosophers and of the learned."

Meaning that it is not through the power of intellect that man apprehends God, because God is beyond our apprehension. But instead: "*He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel.*" In other words, God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ and has given every man access to Himself through the power of His gospel. This is the scandal of Christianity.

"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

It isn't those with great strength and wisdom who have greater access to God, but God has revealed Himself to all mankind and offers close fellowship to all who call on His name. This is a great scandal, especially to those who are wise and strong according to the flesh. They want to believe that they have special access to God on the basis of their great knowledge of deeds. However we are told:

"God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

-James 4:6

This simple truth explains to us why God is choosing to reveal Himself to Moses, and the Israelites at this very moment in history. In the prime of his youth, Moses excelled in both strength and wisdom. We are told in the book of Acts that Moses:

"And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds."

-Acts 7:22

But in the arrogance of his youth, Moses might not have asked this all important question. Instead he might have believed that he *did* know who God was based on what he had learned in Egypt as well as from his mother. But here, in the humility that he learned in exile, he has learned the breadth of his ignorance and is willing to be humble in the sight of God.

“Moreover He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.”

-Exodus 3:6

Israel has likewise failed to cry out to God in their suffering. This doesn't mean that they weren't suffering, but that they weren't humbled in the sight of God. They thought they could handle their own problems, hence the Israeli men who threatened to expose Moses in the previous chapter when he tried to free them from the Pharaoh. It is this same sin that we see play out in the religious leaders of Jesus' day. While they certainly knew much about God through the Scriptures, they made the mistake of believing that they knew *everything* about God. So when Jesus begins to reveal a different nature of God and the Messiah that they hadn't imagined, then, instead of changing their minds in accordance with the new revelation, they crucify Christ. As the early church father Augustine of Hippo put it:

“If you understand, it is not God.”

This is why it is only the humble who can *know* God. The ones who are wise enough to recognize their ignorance are the ones who will receive the revelation of God and not dare to venture further about what they don't know.

“LORD, my heart is not haughty, Nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, Nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, Like a weaned child with his mother; Like a weaned child is my soul within me.”

-Psalm 131:1-2

The Holy God

“And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed.”

-Exodus 3:2

This leads to the first major thing that God reveals to Moses about His nature, and that is His holiness. Before we dive into what that means, I also want to point out that God is revealing Himself to Moses through a symbol, a bush that is burning with fire, yet not consumed. It isn't that God *can't* present Himself to Moses in the form of a man, we have already seen Him do this in the book of Genesis, but it is more in line with the type of revelation that God is making to Moses. He is revealing Himself to Moses not in the form of a simple creature, but as the almighty Creator. In order to do this, He can't limit Himself to words, nor to a simple form, but instead He has to embody a symbol that carries with it more nuance and complexity than words ever could.

So what is the symbol of fire that we see here? The first insight that we can gather is that God is holy.

“For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy.”

-Leviticus 11:44

Now this is a fancy religious word that is bandied about in religious circles, but rarely is it given a full meaning, mainly because it is a complex, and ancient word. The word “holy” in Hebrew is a word that expresses separateness or uniqueness. To put it more simply, and in line with the same stream of thought that we have been following about God, our God is not a part of the created order, but is apart from it. This is unique in most religious ideals. In more religious systems, the gods were a part of the natural order. The gods of the ancient world usually emerge from the natural order and then shape it to their purposes, some of them are even synonymous with natural phenomena like the sea, the sun, the earth, or the sky.

But God shows that this is not His nature. Notice in this depiction, that first the fire doesn't burn the bush. All fire that we are familiar with needs fuel in order to burn. However, the fire of God doesn't need anything to burn, it self-exists and merely reveals itself on the bush. Secondly, God is also not shown to be the fire, Instead we are told: *“...the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush.”*

The Angel, or Messenger of God, appears in the flame, but He is not the flame itself. This also gets into a topic that is interesting but not really worth going into right now. But this “Messenger” of God, also identifies Himself as God during His conversation with Moses. This has led many to believe that this “Messenger” is none other than Christ Himself whose job it is to reveal the Father to the world, but that is a discussion for

another time. For the purposes of our discussion today it is enough to recognize that God is not synonymous with nature, but reveals Himself *through* nature.

"...what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,..."

-Romans 1:19-20

For ancient people, the common mistake they made was to worship nature itself as their Creator. For more modern people, the mistake is to discount nature as superfluous to knowing God. But this story, and the testimony of Scripture, teaches us that God has made Himself known to us through creation. Once again, early Christians, believing that God was so far beyond human comprehension also taught that God could never be understood through nature. They didn't believe that their intellect could grasp God, nor that the creation could possibly reveal God, and so they separated themselves from nature in order to draw closer to God.

Meaning that they withdrew themselves from the pleasures of this world, and sought God in mystical practices and rituals. They then condemned others for having fellowship with this world, and finding pleasure in marriage, family, career, and art. However, what Moses' story should teach us is that he is shown God because he was willing to see God revealed in the creation. When he sees the fire burn without consuming the tree, he is interested and draws near. By drawing near, God then reveals Himself to Moses. Those who withdraw from the creation might be withdrawing from the primary means to know God and draw closer to Him at an experiential level. However, if they are not careful, they might idolize nature and pull away from God. Although it is wordy, I love how Thomas Aquinas put this point:

"...since our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows Him as far as creatures represent Him. Now... God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto, even as the forms of inferior bodies represent the power of the sun... So when we say, "God is good," the meaning is not, "God is the cause of goodness," or "God is not evil"; but the meaning is, "Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God," and in a more excellent and higher way. Hence it does not follow that God is good, because He causes goodness; but rather, on the contrary, He causes goodness in things because

He is good; according to what Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. i, 32), "Because He is good, we are."

-Thomas Aquinas - "Summa Theologica"

Although Aquinas' articulation is complex, it is also beautiful. God's holiness is an occasion to be in awe of what we don't know about God to be sure, but praise God that He does reveal Himself to us in creation, in His word, and even in our very hearts. If Aquinas is a little too complex though, I think that C.S. Lewis puts his point in a more grounded way:

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same."

-C.S. Lewis - "Mere Christianity"

Becoming Holy

"Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."

-Exodus 3:5

The other interesting point is God's call for His people to be holy. For ancient people feet had a greater significance than they do for us today. For them the foot was associated with identity. If we think about this though, it does kind of make sense. Our feet are the parts of us that come into contact with the earth, this means, in some sense, that we are "grounded" or "anchored" to reality through our feet. Our feet are also the parts of us that move us along our given path. It is for this reason why priests had their ears, their thumbs, and their big toes anointed with blood before becoming priests, and why feet play such an interesting role in Christ's ministry. After all it is His feet that are anointed by women, twice. And Christ makes a big deal about washing the feet of His apostles before His crucifixion.

"Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only,

but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.”

-John 13:8-10

There is also significance to Moses removing his sandals. If feet symbolize identity, then shoes would harken back to the coverings of animal skin that Adam and Eve receive after leaving the garden of Eden. To take off his shoes would symbolically be Moses returning to the garden, becoming naked before God. This again might sound strange, but does make sense. When we remove our shoes, we are vulnerable. Since our feet come in contact with the ground, it is our feet that are most vulnerable to one of the spoken effects of the fall, thorns and thistles. To remove his shoes then symbolizes a rebirth for Moses, a baptism by God’s holy fire that will remake his identity and radically change his life.

It is precisely for this reason why many avoid coming near to God. We fearfully cling to our identities and don’t want to be transformed by God. The holiness of God scares most people and moves them away from God’s presence and moves them deeper into this world. But, to those who have the courage of Moses, the courage to be born again, they will find the holiness of God can transform them and make them new.

This is the effect of coming into contact with God’s holiness. If it doesn’t repel us, it can remake us. This is another way to understand the fire. For while the fire provides light and beauty, which is why we stare at flames, it also can burn and “devour” us if we aren’t careful with it. The holiness of God can be a fearful thing. God’s holiness, His apartness, is most shown in His goodness. And just like fire, God’s goodness consumes all that is not good:

“For our God is a consuming fire.”

-Hebrews 12:29

“His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself.”

-Revelation 19:12

However, like the bush that is not burned, but instead is able to display the glory of God, so Moses will not be consumed by God’s glory, but instead be a prophet for Him. This is what the love of God does for His people. We are covered by His love and protected from being consumed by the washing of Christ. We have been purchased by His sacrifice and so we are not consumed by the holiness of God, but we are purified by it. For the same fire that burns thorns and thistles purifies gold and precious metals. We

call this process, “sanctification”, which means, to be made holy. This is the call of God and the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

-Matthew 3:11

The Great I Am

“Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD 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 this is My memorial to all generations.’”

-Exodus 3:13-15

We have already talked about this point so I will try to go through this more quickly. God’s revelation to Moses is not to give Him a specific name. There are some who mistake this point and claim that God revealed His name to Moses as “Yahweh”, sometimes pronounced “Jehovah”. While this is true in one sense, it completely misses the point. The word “Yahweh” in Hebrew is simply the verb tense “to be”. So His “name” means “is”, “being”, or “will be”, which is pretty similar to what He tells Moses “I AM Who I AM.”

But this is not about God teaching His people a magic word that if pronounced correctly sums up His identity, but instead it is about God teaching His people a fundamental truth about His nature. By saying that God is the “I Am”, what He is revealing to us is first that God is self-existent. Unlike the pagan gods who emerge from the creation, God simply is. He has no beginning and will have no end, He exists within Himself and needs nothing to continue being.

Second, God is not merely the creator of life, He is the grounding of being and becoming. He is life itself, all other being has its center and source in Him. This phrase can also be translated “I Will Be Who I will Be”. Meaning that God is also the source of becoming. We find our being in God, but all that we are becoming and all other changes in reality all descend from the being of God.

When Moses asked for a name, he probably was expecting a type of revelation that he was familiar with growing up in Egypt; some smaller deity tied exclusively to the Jewish people, what he was not expecting is the God of the universe, the creator of all reality, and ground of all being to answer him from a burning bush in the middle of nowhere. This is why he immediately hides his face. So, as we have said before, as beautiful as it is to meditate on the love and kindness of our God, it is also good to stand in awe of His majesty and mystery.

The God Who Sees and Hears

“And the LORD said: “I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. “So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. “Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.”

-Exodus 3:7-9

But, this God who is above all the creation does not merely sit in the heavens unmoved by the petty issues of mortal men, He reveals Himself as the God who sees and hears the suffering of His people. It is this same reality that Hagar expressed when she encountered God in the wilderness in the book of Genesis:

“Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?”

-Genesis 16:13

When Aristotle thought about the transcendent God of the universe, he famously called Him “The Unmoved Mover”. The One who exists outside of all causation and gives being to all reality. However, in his more cold vision of God he missed one of the most fundamental qualities of God’s nature, His care for the creation. I think that Polish Rabbi Abraham Heschel put this point best:

“If we put aside the categories and logic of Greek philosophy and try to understand biblical religion in its own terms, we will soon discover that the God of the bible is not Aristotle’s impassive, unmoved mover at all; he can only be described as “the Most Moved Mover.” ... According to the Bible, the single most important thing about God is not his perfection but his concern for the world.”

As the Israelites learned, when they were crying out to God they weren't crying out to a passive, abstract, god in the heavens, but the personal God of their fathers. The God who sees, the God who hears, and the God who acts in His creation. This is the God who would avenge the Israelites:

“So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in its midst; and after that he will let you go. “And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be, when you go, that you shall not go empty-handed. “But every woman shall ask of her neighbor, namely, of her who dwells near her house, articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing; and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

-Exodus 3:19-22

And deliver His own people to the promised land. It is this vision of God that Christians are called to remember when we cry out to God by calling Him, “Our Father in heaven...”

“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

-1 Peter 5:6-7

The God Who Calls

“So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”

-Exodus 3:4

Let's finish our study by focusing on one final aspect of God that He reveals to Moses here, that this same God who hears our call to Him, also calls us.

To Serve

“Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”

-Exodus 3:10-11

The interesting thing about God is that though He is all powerful and capable of accomplishing anything He desires, His strongest desire is to work through mankind.

The reason for this is simple. While God does care about the flow of events and history, He is most concerned with humanity itself. Because of this, He desires to use us to accomplish His will so that we might participate with Him in His good will and be transformed in the process.

Moses goes from a simple shepherd who has found contentment in exile to the one who delivers the people of Israel from bondage. In this process, Moses is transformed from the arrogance of his youth and reticence of his old age, into one of the most humble and wise leaders who ever lived.

In our lives God wants to accomplish the same things. Though God may not call us to something as profound as Moses, God has a calling on each of our lives. He desires for us to partner with Him to lead our families and our friends into a deeper relationship with Him. He desires for us to shoulder responsibilities well and to find our identity in the process. But to head the call of God, like Moses, we have to be willing to wander off our well worn paths. Moses here receives God's call because he attends to the bush burning in the wilderness, in other words he is a man who is willing to be transformed, willing to depart from what is comfortable and to take on the responsibilities that God had for him, though with some initial resistance.

To Sacrifice

"Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, 'The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.'"

-Exodus 3:18

This call to serve is coupled with the call to sacrifice. As Christians, it isn't as though the call of God will always bring us greater material prosperity, God's call often brings about great difficulty and strife. By telling Moses to bring the nation of Israel into the wilderness in order to sacrifice to Him, He is communicating the intent of His call. It wasn't simply to make the Israelites' lives easier, but instead it was to give their lives meaning found in sacrificing to Him.

In our modern culture we believe that true happiness and contentment can be found in the material blessings of the world. By calling His people to offer up their material goods to Him, God is showing them the most profound truth that they could ever learn:

“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.”

-Deuteronomy 8:3

Bread alone, or material provision, while it can satisfy our bodies, it can never satisfy our souls. We were made for more than mere security and prosperity, we were made to discover meaning that is found in the highest calling. Oftentimes, the call of God will not be to material success, but instead, like Moses and the nation of Israel, it is call to humility, self-sacrifice, danger, and uncertainty. When we miss this point, we miss the whole intention of the call of God.

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

-Deitrich Bonhoeffer - “The Cost of Discipleship”

To Freedom

“Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying, “I have surely visited you and seen what is done to you in Egypt; “and I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”’

-Exodus 3:16-17

But this call to sacrifice is ultimately the call to freedom in God. However, we need this initial understanding of sacrifice before we can understand the promised land. Though the land was promised by God, the path there was through the brutal middle eastern desert that led to a land filled with armed combatants. Once again, the call of God is not towards ease and comfort, but towards strife, conflict, and finally, freedom.

Yes, God wants us to taste the wonders of His love and to learn how great it is to experience committed love with another person in a loving marriage. But to get there, we first have to confront our selfishness, our pride, our lust, and every other sin that threatens to destroy the love and commitment that we are trying to build. God wants for us to have successful careers, but we first need to learn how to tell the truth, to remain committed at a job especially when it is difficult and frustrating, and to give our best even if we aren't receiving back the value that we want.

These are small examples but it is the truth. The path to the promised land is filled with dangers and problems. This is especially true in the Christian journey home. We are

moving towards the kingdom of heaven, but by doing so we are seeing the unworthy parts of our soul and learning to deal with them in the power of God's Spirit. Many Christians do not understand the gravity of this call, nor the cost that they will have to pay. But to the ones who understand the call of God to sacrifice, they will discover the call to freedom and to God Himself.

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. 'Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.”

-Exodus 19:5-4