

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS CHAPTER 4

This chapter,

I. Continues and concludes God's discourse with Moses at the bush concerning this great affair of bringing Israel out of Egypt.

1. Moses objects the people's unbelief (#Ex 4:1), and God answers that objection by giving him a power to work miracles,

(1.) To turn his rod into a serpent, and then into a rod again, #Ex 4:2-5.

(2.) To make his hand leprous, and then whole again, #Ex 4:6-8.

(3.) To turn the water into blood, #Ex 4:9.

2. Moses objects his own slowness of speech (#Ex 4:10), and begs to be excused (#Ex 4:13); but God answers this objection,

(1.) By promising him his presence, #Ex 4:11-12.

(2.) By joining Aaron in commission with him, #Ex 4:14-16.

(3.) By putting an honour upon the very staff in his hand, #Ex 4:17.

II. It begins Moses's execution of his commission.

1. He obtains leave of his father-in-law to return into Egypt, #Ex 4:18.

2. He receives further instructions and encouragements from God, #Ex 4:19,21-23.

3. He hastens his departure, and takes his family with him, #Ex 4:20.

4. He meets with some difficulty in the way about the circumcising of his son, #Ex 4:24-26.

5. He has the satisfaction of meeting his brother Aaron, #Ex 4:27-28.

6. He produces his commission before the elders of Israel, to their great joy, #Ex 4:29-31.

And thus the wheels were set a going towards that great deliverance.

Ver. 1.

It was a very great honour that Moses was called to when God commissioned him to bring Israel out of Egypt; yet he is with difficulty persuaded to accept the commission, and does it at last with great reluctance, which we should rather impute to a humble diffidence of himself and his own sufficiency than to any unbelieving distrust of God and his word and power. Note, Those whom God designs for preferment he clothes with humility; the most fit for service are the least forward.

I. Moses objects that in all probability the people would not *hearken to his voice* (#Ex

4:1), that is, they would not take his bare word, unless he showed them some sign, which he had not been yet instructed to do. This objection cannot be justified, because it contradicts what God had said (#Ex 3:18), *They shall hearken to thy voice*. If God says, *They will*, does it become Moses to say, *They will not*? Surely he means,

"Perhaps they will not at first, or some of them will not."

If there should be some gainsayers among them who would question his commission, how should he deal with them? And what course should he take to convince them? He remembered how they had once rejected him, and feared it would be so again. Note,

1. Present discouragements often arise from former disappointments.
2. Wise and good men have sometimes a worse opinion of people than they deserve. Moses said (#Ex 4:1), *They will not believe me*; and yet he was happily mistaken, for it is said (#Ex 4:31), *The people believed*; but then the signs which God appointed in answer to this objection were first wrought in their sight.

II. God empowers him to work miracles, directs him to three particularly, two of which were now immediately wrought for his own satisfaction. Note, True miracles are the most convincing external proofs of a divine mission attested by them. Therefore our Saviour often appealed to his works (as #Joh 5:36), and Nicodemus owns himself convinced by them, #Joh 3:2. And here Moses, having a special commission given him as a judge and lawgiver to Israel, has this seal affixed to his commission, and comes supported by these credentials.

1. The rod in his hand is made the subject of a miracle, a double miracle: it is but thrown out of his hand and it becomes a serpent; he resumes it and it becomes a rod again, #Ex 4:2-4. Now,

(1.) Here was a divine power manifested in the change itself, that a dry stick should be turned into a living serpent, a lively one, so formidable a one that Moses himself, on whom, it should seem, it turned in some threatening manner, *fled from before it*, though we may suppose, in that desert, serpents were no strange things to him; but what was produced miraculously was always the best and strongest of the kind, as the water turned to wine: and, then, that this living serpent should be turned into a dry stick again, this was the Lord's doing.

(2.) Here was an honour put upon Moses, that this change was wrought upon his throwing it down and taking it up, without any spell, or charm, or incantation: his being empowered thus to act under God, out of the common course of nature and providence, was a demonstration of his authority, under God, to settle a new dispensation of the kingdom of grace. We cannot imagine that the God of truth would delegate such a power as this to an impostor.

(3.) There was a significancy in the miracle itself. Pharaoh had turned the rod of Israel into a serpent, representing them as dangerous (#Ex 1:10), causing their belly to cleave to the dust, and seeking their ruin; but now they should be turned into a rod again: or, thus Pharaoh had turned the rod of government into the serpent of oppression, from which Moses had himself fled into Midian; but by the agency of Moses the scene was altered again.

(4.) There was a direct tendency in it to convince the children of Israel that Moses was indeed sent of God to do what he did, #Ex 4:5. Miracles were for signs to those that

believed not, #1Co 14:22.

2. His hand itself is next made the subject of a miracle. He puts it once into his bosom, and takes it out leprous; he puts it again into the same place, and takes it out well, #Ex 4:6-7. This signified,

(1.) That Moses, by the power of God, should bring sore diseases upon Egypt, and that, at his prayer, they should be removed.

(2.) That whereas the Israelites in Egypt had become leprous, polluted by sin, and almost consumed by oppression (a leper is as *one dead*, #Nu 12:12), by being taken into the bosom of Moses they should be cleansed and cured, and have all their grievances redressed.

(3.) That Moses was not to work miracles by his own power, nor for his own praise, but by the power of God and for his glory; the leprous hand of Moses does for ever exclude boasting. Now it was supposed that, if the former sign did not convince, this latter would. Note, God is willing more abundantly to show the truth of his word, and is not sparing in his proofs; the multitude and variety of the miracles corroborate the evidence.

3. He is directed, when he shall come to Egypt, to turn some of the water of the river into blood, #Ex 4:9. This was done, at first, as a sign, but, not gaining due credit with Pharaoh, the whole river was afterwards turned into blood, and then it became a plague. He is ordered to work this miracle in case they would not be convinced by the other two. Note, Unbelief shall be left inexcusable, and convicted of a wilful obstinacy. As to the people of Israel, God had said (#Ex 3:18), *They shall hearken*; yet he appoints these miracles to be wrought for their conviction, for he that has ordained the end has ordained the means.

Ver. 10.

Moses still continues backward to the service for which God had designed him, even to a fault; for now we can no longer impute it to his humility and modesty, but must own that here was too much of cowardice, slothfulness, and unbelief in it. Observe here,

I. How Moses endeavours to excuse himself from the work.

1. He pleads that he was no good spokesman: *O my Lord! I am not eloquent*, #Ex 4:10. He was a great philosopher, statesman, and divine, and yet no orator; a man of a clear head, great thought, and solid judgment, but had not a voluble tongue, or ready utterance, and therefore he thought himself unfit to speak before great men about great affairs, and in danger of being run down by the Egyptians. Observe,

(1.) We must not judge of men by the readiness and fluency of their discourse. Moses was *mighty in word* (#Ac 7:22), and yet not eloquent: what he said was strong and nervous, and to the purpose, and distilled as the dew (#De 32:2), though he did not deliver himself with that readiness, ease, and elegance, that some do, who have not the tenth part of his sense. St. Paul's speech was contemptible, #2Co 10:10. A great deal of wisdom and true worth is concealed by a slow tongue.

(2.) God is pleased sometimes to make choice of those as his messengers who have fewest of the advantages of art or nature, that his grace in them may appear the more glorious. Christ's disciples were no orators, till the Spirit made them such.

2. When this plea was overruled, and all his excuses were answered, he begged that God would send somebody else on this errand and leave him to keep sheep in Midian (#Ex 4:13):

"Send by any hand but mine; thou canst certainly find one much more fit."

Note, An unwilling mind will take up with a sorry excuse rather than none, and is willing to devolve those services upon others that have any thing of difficulty or danger in them.

II. How God condescends to answer all his excuses. Though *the anger of the Lord was kindled against him* (#Ex 4:14), yet he continued to reason with him, till he had overcome him. Note, Even self-diffidence, when it grows into an extreme--when it either hinders us from duty or clogs us in duty, or when it discourages our dependence upon the grace of God--is very displeasing to him. God justly resents our backwardness to serve him, and has reason to take it ill; for he is such a benefactor as is before-hand with us, and such a rewarder as will not be behind hand with us. Note further, God is justly displeased with those whom yet he does not reject: he vouchsafes to reason the case even with his froward children, and overcomes them, as he did Moses here, with grace and kindness.

1. To balance the weakness of Moses, he here reminds him of his own power, #Ex 4:11.

(1.) His power in that concerning which Moses made the objection: *Who has made man's mouth? Have not I the Lord?* Moses knew that God made man, but he must be reminded now that God made man's mouth. An eye to God as Creator would help us over a great many of the difficulties which lie in the way of our duty, #Ps 124:8. God, as the author of nature, has given us the power and faculty of speaking; and from him, as the fountain of gifts and graces, comes the faculty of speaking well, the *mouth and wisdom* (#Lu 21:15), the *tongue of the learned* (#Isa 50:4); he *pours grace into the lips*, #Ps 45:2.

(2.) His power in general over the other faculties. Who but God *makes the dumb and the deaf, the seeing and the blind?*

[1.] The perfections of our faculties are his work, he makes the *seeing*; he formed the eye (#Ps 94:9); he opens the understanding, the eye of the mind, #Lu 24:45.

[2.] Their imperfections are from him too; he make the *dumb*, and *deaf*, and *blind*. Is there any evil of this kind, and the Lord has not done it? No doubt he has, and always in wisdom and righteousness, and for his own glory, #Joh 9:3. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were made deaf and blind spiritually, as #Isa 6:9-10. But God knew how to manage them, and get himself honour upon them.

2. To encourage him in this great undertaking, he repeats the promise of his presence, not only in general, *I will be with thee* (#Ex 3:12), but in particular,

"I will be with thy mouth, so that the imperfection in thy speech shall be no prejudice to thy message."

It does not appear that God did immediately remove the infirmity, whatever it was; but he did that which was equivalent, he taught him what to say, and then let the matter recommend itself: if others spoke more gracefully, none spoke more powerfully. Note, Those whom God employs to speak for him ought to depend upon him for instructions, and *it shall be given them what they shall speak*, #Mt 10:19.

3. He joins Aaron in commission with him. He promises that Aaron shall meet him

opportunely, and that he will be glad to see him, they having not seen one another (it is likely) for many years, #Ex 4:14. He directs him to make use of Aaron as his spokesman, #Ex 4:16. God might have laid Moses wholly aside, for his backwardness to be employed; but he considered his frame, and ordered him an assistant. Observe,

(1.) Two are better than one, #Ec 4:9. God will have his two witnesses (#Re 11:3), that out of their mouths every word may be established.

(2.) Aaron was the brother of Moses, divine wisdom so ordering it, that their natural affection one to another might strengthen their union in the joint execution of their commission. Christ sent his disciples two and two, and some of the couples were brothers.

(3.) Aaron was the elder brother, and yet he was willing to be employed under Moses in this affair, because God would have it so.

(4.) Aaron could speak well, and yet was far inferior to Moses in wisdom. God dispenses his gifts variously to the children of men, that we may see our need one of another, and each may contribute something to the good of the body, #1Co 12:21. The tongue of Aaron, with the head and heart of Moses, would make one completely fit for this embassy.

(5.) God promises, *I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth*. Even Aaron, that could speak well, yet could not speak to purpose unless God was with his mouth; without the constant aids of divine grace the best gifts will fail.

4. He bids him take the rod with him in his hand (#Ex 4:17), to intimate that he must bring about his undertaking rather by acting than by speaking; the signs he should work with this rod might abundantly supply the want of eloquence; one miracle would do him better service than all the rhetoric in the world. *Take this rod*, the rod he carried as a shepherd, that he might not be ashamed of that mean condition out of which God called him. This rod must be his staff of authority, and must be to him instead both of sword and sceptre.

Ver. 18.

Here,

I. Moses obtains leave of his father-in-law to return into Egypt, #Ex 4:18. His father-in-law had been kind to him when he was a stranger, and therefore he would not be so uncivil as to leave his family, nor so unjust as to leave his service, without giving him notice. Note, The honour of being admitted into communion with God, and of being employed for him, does not exempt us from the duties of our relations and callings in this world. Moses said nothing to his father-in-law (for aught that appears) of the glorious manifestation of God to him; such favours we are to be thankful for to God, but not to boast of before men.

II. He receives from God further encouragements and directions in his work. After God had appeared to him in the bush to settle a correspondence, it should seem, he often spoke to him, as there was occasion, with less overwhelming solemnity. And,

1. He assures Moses that the coasts were clear. Whatever new enemies he might make by his undertaking, his old enemies were *all dead, all that sought his life*, #Ex 4:19. Perhaps some secret fear of falling into their hands was at the bottom of Moses's backwardness to go to Egypt, though he was not willing to own it, but pleaded unworthiness, insufficiency, want of elocution, &c. Note, God knows all the

temptations his people lie under, and how to arm them against their secret fears, **#Ps 142:3.**

2. He orders him to do the miracles, not only before the elders of Israel, but before Pharaoh, **#Ex 4:21.** There were some alive perhaps in the court of Pharaoh who remembered Moses when he was the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and had many a time called him a fool for deserting the honours of that relation; but he is now sent back to court, clad with greater powers than Pharaoh's daughter could have advanced him to, so that it might appear he was no loser by his choice: this wonder working rod did more adorn the hand of Moses than the sceptre of Egypt could have done. Note, Those that look with contempt upon worldly honours shall be recompensed with the honour that cometh from God, which is the true honour.
3. That Pharaoh's obstinacy might be no surprise nor discouragement to him, God tells him before that he would *harden his heart*. Pharaoh had hardened his own heart against the groans and cries of the oppressed Israelites, and shut up the bowels of his compassion from them; and now God, in a way of righteous judgment, hardens his heart against the conviction of the miracles, and the terror of the plagues. Note, Ministers must expect with many to labour in vain: we must not think it strange if we meet with those who will not be wrought upon by the strongest arguments and fairest reasonings; yet our judgment is with the Lord.
4. Words are put into his mouth with which to address Pharaoh, **#Ex 4:22-23.** God had promised him (**#Ex 4:12**), *I will teach thee what thou shalt say*; and here he does teach him.

(1.) He must deliver his message in the name of the great Jehovah: *Thus saith the Lord*; this is the first time *that* preface is used by any man which afterwards is used so frequently by all the prophets: whether Pharaoh will hear, or whether he will forbear, Moses must tell him, *Thus saith the Lord*.

(2.) He must let Pharaoh know Israel's relation to God, and God's concern for Israel. *Is Israel a servant? is he a home-born slave?* **#Jer 2:14.**

"No, *Israel is my son, my firstborn, precious in my sight, honourable, and dear to me, not to be thus insulted and abused.*"

(3.) He must demand a discharge for them:

"Let my son go; not only my servant whom thou hast no right to detain, but my son whose liberty and honour I am very jealous for. It is my son, my son that serves me, and therefore must be spared, must be pleaded for,"

#Mal 3:17.

(4.) He must threaten Pharaoh with the death of the first-born of Egypt, in case of a refusal: *I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.* As men deal with God's people, let them expect to be themselves dealt with; with the froward he will wrestle.

III. Moses addresses himself to this expedition. When God had assured him (**#Ex 4:19**) that the men were dead who sought his life, immediately it follows (**#Ex 4:20**), *he took his wife, and his sons*, and set out for Egypt. Note, Though corruption may object much against the services God calls us to, yet grace will get the upper hand, and will be obedient to the heavenly vision.

Ver. 24.

Moses is here going to Egypt, and we are told,

I. How God met him in anger, #Ex 4:24-26. This is a very difficult passage of story; much has been written, and excellently written, to make it intelligible; we will try to make it improving. Here is,

1. The sin of Moses, which was neglecting to circumcise his son. This was probably the effect of his being unequally yoked with a Midianite, who was too indulgent of her child, while Moses was too indulgent of her. Note,

(1.) We have need to watch carefully over our own hearts, lest fondness for any relation prevail above our love to God, and take us off from our duty to him. It is charged upon Eli that he *honoured his sons more than God* (#1Sa 2:29; Mt 10:37.

(2.) Even good men are apt to cool in their zeal for God and duty when they have long been deprived of the society of the faithful: solitude has its advantages, but they seldom counterbalance the loss of Christian communion.

2. God's displeasure against him. He met him, and, probably by a sword in an angel's hand, sought to kill him. This was a great change; very lately God was conversing with him, and lodging a trust in him, as a friend; and now he is coming forth against him as an enemy. Note,

(1.) Omissions are sins, and must come into judgment, and particularly the contempt and neglect of the seals of the covenant; for it is a sign that we undervalue the promises of the covenant, and are displeased with the conditions of it. He that has made a bargain, and is not willing to seal and ratify it, one may justly suspect, neither likes it nor designs to stand to it.

(2.) God takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sins of his own people. If they neglect their duty, let them expect to hear of it by their consciences, and perhaps to feel from it by cross providences: for this cause many are sick and weak, as some think Moses was here.

3. The speedy performance of the duty for the neglect of which God had now a controversy with him. His son must be circumcised; Moses is unable to circumcise him; therefore, in this case of necessity, Zipporah does it, whether with passionate words (expressing her dislike of the ordinance itself, or at least the administration of it to so young a child, and in a journey), as to me it seems, or with proper words--solemnly expressing the espousal of the child to God by the covenant of circumcision (as some read it) or her thankfulness to God for sparing her husband, giving him a new life, and thereby giving her, as it were, a new marriage to him, upon her circumcising her son (as others read it)--I cannot determine: but we learn,

(1.) That when God discovers to us what is amiss in our lives we must give all diligence to amend it speedily, and particularly return to the duties we have neglected.

(2.) The putting away of our sins is indispensably necessary to the removal of God's judgements. This is the voice of every rod, it calls to us to return to him that smites us.

4. The release of Moses thereupon: *So he let him go*; the distemper went off, the

destroying angel withdrew, and all was well: only Zipporah cannot forget the fright she was in, but will unreasonably call Moses *a bloody husband*, because he obliged her to circumcise the child; and, upon this occasion (it is probable), he sent them back to his father-in-law, that they might not create him any further uneasiness. Note,

(1.) When we return to God in a way of duty he will return to us in a way of mercy; take away the cause, and the effect will cease.

(2.) We must resolve to bear it patiently, if our zeal for God and his institutions be misinterpreted and discouraged by some that should understand themselves, and us, and their duty, better, as David's zeal was misinterpreted by Michal; but if this be to be vile, if this be to be bloody, we must be yet more so.

(3.) When we have any special service to do for God we should remove as far from us as we can that which is likely to be our hindrance. *Let the dead bury their dead, but follow thou me.*

II. How Aaron met him in love, #Ex 4:27-28.

1. God sent Aaron to meet him, and directed him where to find him, in the wilderness that lay towards Midian. Note, The providence of God is to be acknowledged in the comfortable meeting of relations and friends.
2. Aaron made so much haste, in obedience to his God, and in love to his brother, that he met him *in the mount of God*, the place where God had met with him.
3. They embraced one another with mutual endearments. The more they saw of God's immediate direction in bringing them together the more pleasant their interview was: they *kissed*, not only in token of brotherly affection, and in remembrance of ancient acquaintance, but as a pledge of their hearty concurrence in the work to which they were jointly called.
4. Moses informed his brother of the commission he had received, with all the instructions and credentials affixed to it, #Ex 4:28. Note, What we know of God we should communicate for the benefit of others; and those that are fellow-servants to God in the same work should use a mutual freedom, and endeavour rightly and fully to understand one another.

III. How the elders of Israel met him in faith and obedience. When Moses and Aaron first opened their commission in Egypt, said what they were ordered to say, and, to confirm it, did what they were ordered to do, they met with a better reception than they promised themselves, #Ex 4:29-31.

1. The Israelites gave credit to them: *The people believed*, as God had foretold (#Ex 3:18), knowing that no man could do those works that they did, unless God were with him. They gave glory to God: *They bowed their heads and worshipped*, therein expressing not only their humble thankfulness to God, who had raised them up and sent them a deliverer, but also their cheerful readiness to observe orders, and pursue the methods of their deliverance.