

## “Who Are You?”– Exodus 3:11-14

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take a Bible and meet me in Exodus 3 (page \_\_\_\_ in pew Bibles)...

While you turn there, let me say a few words about last Sunday night. When we began that night, I read a quote from David Helm that said, “If we are a non-praying people, it indicates that we still think *we* can get the job done.”<sup>1</sup> God’s people everywhere should be known as a praying people because we, most of all, know we cannot get the job done. He must do the heavy lifting for everything of eternal significance. We have to rely on Him. We pray to Him. We have to press in. We have to confess our need. We have to raise the sail and rely on Him to send the wind.

And let me tell you, that’s what we did last week...

[Elaborate]

A few years ago there was *New York Times* article in which a columnist by the name of Niall Ferguson captured well our society’s tendency to “yearn for turning points.” I stumbled on this article while reading the work of another pastor by the name of David Strain, who explained that this is why journalists have been able to predict eleven out of the last five revolutions and economists eleven out of the last five recessions. In other words, they are reporting more revolutions and recessions than have actually occurred. “Every election,” writes Ferguson, “is hailed as epoch making. Every president is expected to have a new foreign policy doctrine. A minor redesign of a cellular phone is hailed by the devotees of the Apple cult as a paradigm shift. The point about paradigm shifts, as Thomas Kuhn pointed out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is that they don’t happen every year; they just don’t happen that often.”

Ferguson is putting his finger on an important reality. We yearn for turning points. We yearn for paradigm shifts. We get excited by change, whether it’s in our personal lives, our cultural environment, our political system, our technology, or anything else that matters to us. It’s why every politician runs as “the change candidate.” It’s why Pokémon Go can take off over night and software updates are national news. It’s why everyone went paleo for a while. It’s why Crossfit is all the rage, until it’s not. It’s why every Apple commercial makes you feel like something is coming out that can cure all that ails you.

But real change, as Ferguson was pointing out, real epoch making and world altering change, is an oddity. It doesn’t happen all that often. In fact, it hardly ever does.<sup>2</sup> Yet as we continue in our series through the first half of Exodus and we resume our study in chapter 3, we are indeed reading the account of one of the most significant turning points in the history of the world. It was certainly a turning point for Israel. It was a turning point in the life of Moses. And it was a turning point in the overall story that the Bible is telling. For this reason we are going to linger here for a while. Today we are laying the groundwork for future weeks.

Exodus 3 and (most of) 4 are outlining the commission that God gave to Moses and the provisions that God made for Moses. Last Sunday, Nathan got us started on understanding Moses’ commission and how it was communicated when God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Today and the next couple of Sundays

we will be considering how God provides what Moses will need to fulfill the calling God has placed on his life and how commission and provision always go together.

There are several ways we can approach this text, but they are not all created equal. Many, for instance, have chosen to read it as though it was primarily about Moses. We could do that. We could read it as anthropologists or psychologists. We could fixate on Moses' self-confidence issues. We could search for a lesson on self-esteem. We could aim to build our self-worth. Some of these kinds of matters are important and some of them we will raise next week (though probably not in the way you're expecting). But if that's all we do, then, while we may have the makings of a good Oprah or Dr. Phil show, we will miss the most important feature of the story. This is not, first and foremost, a story about Moses. Moses is not at the center of this narrative. The center is God. So we have to read this text theologically. We have to ask what we ask of every text—what is this text teaching us about God? And, with God's help, that is what I intend to do today...and every week.

So let me catch you up. In chapter 3, Moses is found shepherding the flock of a Midianite priest in the middle of nowhere. He stumbles upon a bush that is burning and yet not consumed. God speaks to Moses through that miraculous fire, making His divine intentions clear. Moses learns that God knows the sufferings of His people enslaved in Egypt, He is going to rescue them from that bondage, and He's going to use Moses to do it. That's where we left off. Moses has been called of God to go to Egypt as God's instrument of deliverance. He's going to be God's spokesman in Egypt. He's going to be the appointed leader of God's people. And immediately after learning of this calling, Moses requests a recount. That's where we will pick up. Follow along as I read, starting in verse 11. This is God's Word...

*“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’<sup>12</sup> He said, ‘But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.’<sup>13</sup> Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’*  
(Exodus 3:11-14)

Once Moses opens his mouth we immediately see his inadequacies and insecurities bubbling up to the surface. His fear is instantly recognizable from his first question. He asks, *“Who am I...?”* While some commentators praise Moses for humility, as if the question is a response of unworthiness in light of the holiness of God. But when you read the rest of this chapter and the next and you see that Moses repeatedly questions the mission and his abilities, it seems much more likely that question springs not from humility but fear. He's afraid of what might happen if he goes back to Egypt.

Now, that's understandable, isn't it? Moses finds himself in that desert of Midian because he previously ran away from Egypt out of fear for his own life. Forty years ago Moses killed an Egyptian and the Pharaoh put a death sentence on his head. In Egypt he had been rejected by God's people and by the Egyptians. His previous attempts to deliver the Israelites had utterly failed. Fear has kept him from returning to Egypt for decades. Now God is sending him back. God wants Moses to be the keynote speaker at the most memorable reunion in Egyptian history. All those fears resurfaces. *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”*

I'm not sure that we should praise Moses for that response. It reveals a lack of confidence in God. But we can at least sympathize and not pretend like we would have been immune to his doubts. He's looking inside himself and he's not seeing anything that would give him confidence that he can get the job done. That's why he asks, *“Who am I?”*

Of course, this is a popular question in our world today. Our culture invites us to ask this question all the time. We “self-identify” in ways that defy all logic. We are encouraged to ask the question, “Who am I?” and then told that there are no incorrect answers. What was once a question with a definitive answer, has been changed to fill in the blank. Look at the whole gender identity conversation that’s happening in our country lately. If God is our Creator, then our identity is caught up in His design and purpose. When that design and purpose is ignored or rejected, you create an atmosphere where *we* get to determine who we are. The way you self-identify becomes “fluid and malleable” and “something you achieve rather than something you receive.”<sup>3</sup>

That level of autonomy may seem very appealing, but it’s all an illusion. It’s not reality. It may be enjoyable to create your own identity, but eventually you find yourself unable to deliver. As Tim Chester explains,

“For many people the pressure to achieve and sustain our self-built identities becomes too much. Rates of depression are higher than ever before, and part of that is caused by the brittleness of our sense of who we are, which means we are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating our identity, striving to confirm it and dealing with failures to live up to it... Whether you are trying to fit in at school or prove yourself in your career or keep up with the latest fashions, eventually the cracks will appear. Always the question remains: Will my self-made identity withstand the pressures of this life, and then the test of divine appraisal beyond this life?”<sup>4</sup>

He’s right. That’s game our culture is playing and celebrating right now. And amid the glee of it all, no one seems to recognize that it’s damaging us. And it very well could damn us.

Of course, when Moses asks the question, “Who am I?”, he’s not asking the same existential question that the college freshman asks when he takes his first philosophy course. His question is practical and has to do with his ability deficit. He feels inadequate because of his weakness (“*who am I...*”), because of Pharaoh’s power (“...*that I should go to Pharaoh...*”), and because of the magnitude of the task ahead (“...*and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt*”).<sup>5</sup> He’s looking inward and he’s looking at his obstacles. What he’s not doing is focusing on God. No wonder he’s so nervous. And no wonder God responds the way He does. Look at God’s response in verse 12. Moses asks, “*Who am I?*” God answers, “*I will be with you...*”

At first glance, that seems like a pretty strange answer. In fact, it seems like an answer to a different question. Moses asked, “Who am I?” We might have expected God’s answer to explain why Moses is in fact the right guy for the job. Maybe God could have reminded Moses that he had been trained in Egypt by the best minds in the world. Maybe God could have told him how much shepherding sheep had prepared him for shepherding a stubborn people. Maybe God would have explained how He was preparing Moses through what he had suffered. All that is true. But that’s not what God says. If God had said that, Moses would have been tempted to rely on his own strength and experience to get the job done. But Moses needed to rely on God.<sup>6</sup> If he didn’t, the only outcome would be failure.

So when God responds to Moses’ question, “*Who am I...?*”, by saying, “*I will be with you,*” it’s not because He’s ignoring Moses’ question. It’s not even because Moses is merely asking the wrong question. God answer Moses’ actual question. He gives Moses *the* answer. It’s just not the one he expected. Moses thought the answer would be found in himself and wanted God to help him locate it, which is why he was so confused. He needed to find the answer by looking at God.

Friends, this is really important. Regardless of whether we ask that question existentially (in terms of our identity) or practically (in terms of abilities), the answer we need is the same. Your understanding of your identity and your understanding of your ability should be built upon the God who designed you and gives your life its true meaning and significance. In other words, a true understanding of who you are and the possibilities of how God can use you in the future are shaped by who God is. Therefore, your understanding

of who you are is always going to be off to the degree that you're off in your understanding of who God is.

This is why A. W. Tozer famously opens his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with these words:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, John Calvin, the Protestant Reformer and one of the most influential Christian thinkers of church history, began the first chapter of his most significant work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by writing:

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”<sup>8</sup>

Do you see what they are saying? We won't get who we are or how God can use us unless we grasp something of who God is. The internal struggles of our lives are, in all likelihood, theology problems. That's why Moses doesn't need God to boost his self-esteem. He needs God to inform his theology. And that's exactly what God does. This is how God gets us on track too. This is how God gives us victory over temptation (e.g., worry, anger, pride, etc.). If you were to ask Jesus, “Jesus, I struggle with anxiety, how can I stop worrying?”, you know what He would say? He'd give you a theology lesson. Look around you and see the way God takes care of the birds in the air and how he cares for the lilies of the field. Isn't He an attentive God? Doesn't this show that He cares for His creation. He values His creation. He values you. What a God! So don't worry (cf. Matthew 5:25-34). Or maybe you are struggling with wisdom and you don't know what to do. You know the solution the Bible gives in James? It's theological. Isn't God generous. Doesn't he give graciously to all without finding fault. What an amazing God. So, in faith, ask Him for wisdom and He will come through (cf. James 1:5-8). [Forgiveness...you have been forgiven...the Gospel]

We could keep going, but you get the idea. “Everything we do wrong and every experience of inordinate anxiety or anger or pride always comes because, at that moment, we're forgetting who God really is.”<sup>9</sup> Our struggle with sin is theological. The answers we need to seek are theological. Therefore, we need to look to God's Word for answers. And if we do that we are going to discover that the way God answers those struggles in our lives is not the way much of modern preaching does. It's not ten steps to fighting back fear or five methods for conquering greed. It's not positive thinking pep talks. It's not your best life now nonsense. It's not the broken record of “you're awesome, so let me boost your self-esteem” (by feeding your ego). That may be what we are looking for in preaching, but that's not what we find in the Bible. What we find over and over in the Bible is the prophets and the apostles and the Jesus Himself addressing all of these things and more by saying, “Look! This is our God! Do you see what He is like? Take in His glory. Look at how He's forgiving you and keep looking until it blows up your pride that keeps you from forgiving others. Look how slow to anger He is and keep looking until you see your anger problem evaporate. Look at how generous He has been to you, even giving His only Son for you, and keep looking until you are transformed to be a generous person. This is your God! Look! Behold! Worship!” That's why I love theology, church! And that's why you should too! And that's why the answers that you need are, very likely, theological and you just haven't realized it yet.

And that's why when Moses is feeling His own weakness and inadequacy God doesn't give him a pep talk

to boost his confidence. God says, “*I will be with you...*” (Exodus 3:12). He shifts Moses’ focus from inward to upward. He saying, “Look at Me, Moses. I know you’re afraid. So look at me! You don’t have what it takes, but I will be with you.” For this reason, Moses’ second question is very appropriate. Look at what he asks next, in verse 13—“*If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’*” So note the progression. Moses asks, “Who am I?” God answers, “I’ll be with you.” So Moses asks, “Well, who are you? Who is the ‘I’ who will be with me?” In the next verse, something significant happens. God reveals His name. This is huge guys!

Do you remember that famous line in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet says, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?” What she meant by that is that “what matters is not the name something bears, but rather the essence of the thing itself.”<sup>10</sup> She’s suggesting, in other words, that names don’t really matter. But that kind of thinking would not have been accepted in the ancient world. In biblical times, names really did matter because you invested in a name something of the person’s character.<sup>11</sup> To know the name is to know something about the person. That’s why biblical names so often change and why so much is made of the meaning of biblical names. So when Moses is asking for a name here, he’s not just looking for a more specific designation (i.e., “what should we call You?”). He’s trying to understand something about the nature of the God who is sending him.

Then God reveals His name. Are you ready? Well, we have to pick things up here next time. I’m sorry. I know, I’m the worst. That was like the most brutal cliffhanger ever. But you can read ahead. We encourage that around here. But we simply don’t have time to do verse 14 justice today. So next time, we will explore the personal name God gives. We’ll look at the variations of that name within the verse. We’ll consider what the name itself is communicating about God. We will see how that points us to Christ and how the New Testament picks up the name and applies it to Christ. And we will walk away encourage by who God has revealed Himself to be and how that shapes who we are by extension. It’s going to be great. Don’t miss it. Bring friends (or enemies). Seriously, you need to invite people. The next two sermons are really important.

Let me close with this quick thought. If what I have said this morning is true—if our identity and the help we need for the life God is calling us to live flows from a right understanding of who God is—then one of the best applications of the sermon today would be for you to read your Bible more. I know that sounds cheesy and cliché. Read your Bible more! But seriously, you need to. The only way you will know your God is by looking at what He has revealed about Himself in this Word. That’s the only source of reliable truth on the matter. Your feelings will mislead you. They’re subjective. We need objective truth and that’s what He has provided and preserved for us in His Word. So if you are not reading it consistently, you need to start. Get a plan. It doesn’t have to be ambitious. It just needs to be earnest.

But let me also add this... Of all the questions Moses asks in chapters 3 and 4, the best one He asks is the one in verse 13—“who are you?” That’s the kind of question that can revolutionize your Bible study. You are not reading for historical knowledge. You’re not reading to compete on Bible Jeopardy (is that a thing?). You are reading because the God of the universe—who created everything that exists and who literally sustains you with ever beat of your heart and breath that passes your lips—have graciously revealed Himself to you. So (and I tell you this all the time, but I’m going to tell you again) the most important question you can ask every time you read a text from God’s Word is what does this text teach us about God?

Like today, what do verses 11 to 13 teach us about God? Among other things, they remind us that we have to seek our identity from the Lord. They remind us that His presence can calm our fears, so in times of anxiety we need to look to Him. They remind us that what God calls us to do has more to do with who God is than it does with who we are. Etc. You have to learn to ask the question, what does this text teach me about God? Whether you are reading in Exodus, or Psalms, or Matthew, or Revelation. Let that question

drive your study. Ask that question every time you open the Word. If you do that continually, you're teaching yourself to look to God. When the troubles come in your life, you're far more likely to look up instead of in. You'll be better equipped to spot false teaching. And you'll be able to identify emptiness of teaching that is really looking to the world or to our own selves as the solution, no matter how attractive that teaching may appear. Even if that teaching is spouted from a pulpit.

So every time you read God's Word (which I hope will be more often today than it was in days gone by) learn to ask that question, "What does this text teach us about God?" I try to model that for you in my preaching, though I don't always pause and say, "Hey, see what we are doing right here?". But next week's sermon I'm going to model that very explicitly. We are going to say, "What does this detail teach us about God...and what does that detail teach us about God...and what about this one..." And, if you're a believer, you're going to really like what you see because our God is glorious and this chapter really helps us see that. So be here.

I love you guys. Let's pray...[Gospel presentation and invitation]

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<sup>1</sup> David Helm, "The Holy Spirit, Prayer, and Preaching," in *The Church Praying* (9 Marks Journal; Spring, 2016), 18.

<sup>2</sup> This article is referred to by David Strain in a sermon called, "I AM Who I AM," preached on October 5, 2014. As of August 11, 2016, the sermon could be found at the following web address: <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/i-am-who-i-am--2>.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Chester, *Exodus For You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 31-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Philip G. Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 92-93.

<sup>7</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1961), 1.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion – Volume 1*; ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Keller, "The God with a Name," preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, New York, on November 21, 2010, and accessed through Logos Bible Software.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony T. Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel According to Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 41.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Currid, *Exodus – Volume 1* (Evangelical Press Study Commentary; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2015), 81-82.