

“Are You On Fire or Burned Out?”

Exodus 3:1-15

Series: Outlaws and Outcasts Week 2. Moses

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He wanted to be a cowboy: to ride across the open range, to hunt buffalo, to roundup the herd. He hoped to taste the old West before it disappeared forever. At the age of 24, he left behind a promising career in the East arriving in the badlands of North Dakota on September 8, 1883. The locals laughed at him and called him “four eyes.” They sized him up as a frail and snobbish “dude” who suffered from asthma. Yet he so loved the badlands by the Little Missouri River Valley he impulsively bought two ranches. In time he won the cowboys’ confidence and returned home leaving his ranches in capable hands.

Some months later, a devastating tragedy ripped him apart. On the same day, in the same New York City brownstone house, his wife and his mother died. It was Valentine’s Day, 1884. The grief was more than he could bear. It burned him to the core. All he could do was run away to the West. The vast emptiness of the badlands must have mirrored his aching soul. He threw himself into the ranching life - leading cattle drives and roundups, stopping stampedes, arresting thieves, and punching out a drunken gunslinger in a bar. Little by little his heart healed. Out there under the open sky he said, “the romance of my life began.” It’s not too much of a stretch to say that exile in Dakota Territory formed the character of Theodore Roosevelt and prepared him to be one of the greatest Presidents the United States has ever known. From the ashes of a burned out soul among the herds, Roosevelt was reignited and went out to set the world on fire.

Are you on fire or burned out? Burn out happens when the demands of the day become more than you can manage. This condition flares up when you feel you’ve been doing the same tasks over and over for years without any progress or purpose. This situation sears you when your relationships, the ones closest to you, scorch you. Caught in the crossfire of arguments and conflicts, singed by circumstances beyond your control, charred by the overwhelming demands of work and family, you can’t stand the heat and you have no spark of fire left to give. You just want to run away.

Like Roosevelt, Moses ran from the fire. This child born to be a slave was adopted into Pharaoh’s family and ascended to be a prince of Egypt. Attempting to strike a blow for justice, he becomes a murderer and flees into the desert. Egypt is the super power of the day – the center of wealth, luxury and might. The wilderness has none of these. It is similar to Roosevelt’s escape to the Dakotas. And now, several decades later, Moses is adapted to the desert. He’s married, has children and works in his father-in-law’s business herding sheep. He’s out in the sticks with the hicks. How do we know? His father-in-law’s name is Jethro.

But one day, while Moses leads his flock through Hicksville “to the far side of the desert” he spies some sticks on fire. Flames lick the branches of a bush. Moses watches for a while. He’s seen brush catch fire in the desert sun but it usually burns out. This

blaze doesn't. Curious, he says, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up" (Exodus 3:3). Leaving the flock behind, Moses ascends the mountain. Like a moth to a flame, Moses is drawn closer to the small inferno when suddenly it calls his name, twice: "Moses, Moses."

When I was a child, I used to be afraid when the furnace in the basement ignited at night. It sounded like a monster or intruder slowly climbing the steps. Now imagine a furnace which roars into flame and then starts calling your name. "Here I am," Moses says with a trembling voice. "Do not come any closer," the Voice replies. "No problem," Moses probably thinks.

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:5-6).

No words can describe the terror that races through Moses' mortal body. Raging fire, jagged lightning, nuclear annihilation cannot compare because Moses is now face to face with the God who creates all those earthly powers. Yet God does not come down to condemn the world, but to save it. He tells Moses He sees the misery, hears the wailing and knows the suffering of His people Israel. It is time for Him to fulfill His promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-21). He will free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and take them to the Promised Land.

Up to this point, Moses is probably cheering in his heart. But then God says, "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). "What me God? You want to send me?" Like a searchlight, that burning bush instantly reveals all the flaws and weaknesses in Moses. All his self-doubts rise to the surface. The same is true whenever we get close to God. Our weaknesses and doubts are exposed. You can become so used to being burned out you don't even notice you're living in a desert. That's why God lights something on fire to get your attention.

Moses' first objection is *I'm Nobody*. "But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). He's a toppled prince, a guilty murderer, a desperate fugitive. He's been out of the loop, in the desert, for forty years. Nobody back there knows him and those who do probably want to kill him. When you are burned out, you begin to doubt yourself. You focus on problems instead of solutions, on your weaknesses and faults not your God-given gifts. Instead of learning from mistakes you're imprisoned by them. You feel drained of all your energy.

Now notice, God doesn't argue with Moses. He doesn't pump him up with affirmations or stroke his self-esteem. He replies with this promise: "I will be with you." (Exodus 3:12). Luis Palau is one of the most powerful evangelists in the world. I heard him at the Creation festival. But when he was in Bible College he had a lot of doubts about his ability to preach. Then Ian Thomas preached at one of their chapel services.

He talked about how it took Moses 40 years in the wilderness to learn that he was nothing. Then one day Moses was confronted with a burning bush—likely a dry bunch of ugly sticks—yet Moses had to take off his sandals. Why? Because God was in the bush!

Major Thomas said, “God was telling Moses, ‘I don’t need a pretty bush or an educated bush or an eloquent bush. Any old bush will do as long as I’m in the bush. If I’m going to use you, it won’t be you doing something for me, but me doing something through you.’”

I was that kind of bush: a useless bunch of dried up sticks. I could do nothing for God. All my reading and studying and modeling myself after others was worthless unless God was in the bush. Only he could make something happen. When Thomas closed his message, I ran back to my room and in tears prayed in my native Spanish. My spiritual struggle was finally over! I’d let God be God and let Luis be dependent on him.¹

God can do great things with nobodies like you and me.

Moses’ second objection follows the first: *Who Are You?* Seems like a strange question. But remember, Moses was raised among the Egyptians who worshiped multiple gods. He lives with Jethro’s multiple gods. Moses lost touch with the One True God.

America is fast becoming a supermarket of religious beliefs. Freedom of religion is truly one of the great strengths of this nation. In fact, a Newsweek poll found that 84% of Americans say that spirituality is very important or somewhat important to their daily lives.² Yet the Pew Research Center found:

Overall, 35% of adult Millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) are religiously unaffiliated. Far more Millennials say they have no religious affiliation compared with those who identify as evangelical Protestants (21%), Catholics (16%) or mainline Protestants (11%).³

Today it’s Do It Yourself Religion. They derive their understanding of God from a mixture of childhood lessons, movies, TV, the Internet and their personal preferences. Instead of making up your own god, why not meet the One True God? That’s why we need Discovery Kingdom team members, Adventure Club parents, Youth leaders and Growth Group leaders who will introduce the Lord to this generation.

When Moses asks, “What is your name?” God replied, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’ (v. 14). He is not the sun god, the wind god, the earth god, the war god or the love god. He is not the money

¹ Luis Palau, *Men of Integrity* (May/June 2002).

² Jerry Adler, “In Search of the Spiritual,” *Newsweek*, August 29/September 5 issue, p. 48.

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>

god, the power god, the popularity god or the pleasure god. He is not the god of the past, the absent god or the far away god. He is not a made up god or a DIY god. His name is “I AM.” He is and He is with us always. There are no other gods.

Moses’ third objection is: ***I Can’t Do It.***

Moses said to the Lord, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” (Exodus 4:10)

26% of Americans say their biggest fear, even more than death, is public speaking. But God won’t let Moses get away with that. “Who gave man his mouth? Is it not I the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (Exodus 4:11-12). The truth is God has been preparing Moses for this moment his whole life. This Prince of Egypt will go face to face with the King of Egypt. This Desert Shepherd will lead God’s lambs through the desert for forty years. This Fugitive who knows the pain of breaking the Law will be the Great Lawgiver to God’s people. And this man who claims to be afraid of speaking to Pharaoh is doing a pretty good job of talking back to God. If God calls you to serve Him, He will fully equip you.

Finally, Moses simply says, ***“I Won’t Do It.”*** “But Moses said, ‘O Lord, please send someone else to do it’” (Exodus 4:13). Now God gets mad. Don’t ever say to God, “I won’t do it.” You don’t want to make Him mad. And besides, He’ll find a way to work around you to accomplish His will. Despite Moses’ refusal, God still moved him to become the Deliverer of His people. He led them from Egypt through the desert to the Promised Land. Dr. Leonard Sweet says,

The world’s a better place because Moses didn’t say, “I don’t do Pharaohs.”
The world’s a better place because Ruth didn’t say, “I don’t do mothers-in-law.”
The world’s a better place because David didn’t say, “I don’t do giants.”
The world’s a better place because Mary didn’t say, “I don’t do virgin births.”
The world’s a better place because John the Baptist didn’t say, “I don’t do deserts.”
The world’s a better place because Mary Magdalene didn’t say, “I don’t do graveyards.”
The world’s a better place because Peter didn’t say, “I don’t do sermons.”
The world’s a better place because Paul didn’t say, “I don’t do letters.”
The world’s a better place because Jesus didn’t say, “I don’t do crosses.”
And the world will be a better place only if you and I don’t say, “I don’t do ...”⁴

God wants to set you on fire. He knows your weaknesses but they don’t matter – He’ll be with you. He knows you don’t know everything. He’ll teach you. He knows you need help. He’ll equip you. He knows you don’t want to go. That’s the one thing you have to do. You have to go. And if you do, He’ll be with you. Will you decide to work with Him or will you make Him work around you?

⁴ Leonard Sweet, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 2.

He is a young pastor in the first few months of his first church. It was time for him to give an extremely important sermon. It had been such a busy day that he had less than half an hour to prepare it. He recalls,

I went to my study and closed the door. The minutes were passing fast. I had only twenty minutes to prepare the most decisive speech of my life. I became possessed by fear. Now I was faced with the inescapable task of preparing, in almost no time at all, a speech that was expected to give a sense of direction to people with a new passion for justice. I was also conscious that reporters and television men would be there with their pencils and sound cameras poised to record my words and send them across the nation.

I was now almost overcome, obsessed by a feeling of inadequacy. In this state of anxiety, I wasted five minutes of the original twenty. With nothing left but faith in a power whose matchless strength stands over against the frailties and inadequacies of human nature, I turned to God in prayer. My words were brief and simple, asking God to restore my balance and to be with me in a time when I needed His guidance more than ever.⁵

Then he rose from prayer, left his study and Martin Luther King, Jr. preached the first sermon to the first meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott – the first step in the Civil Rights Movement. The world's a better place because Martin Luther King didn't say, "I don't do sermons."

When the burning bush calls you, say "Here am I, Lord. Send me."

⁵ The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Edited by Clayborne Carson, c. 1998 Warner Books, Inc., New York, New York., p. 58-59.