

Don't Forget Your Staff
Exodus: The God Who Delivers Series
Exodus 4:1-31
Pastor Bryan Clark

Every person in this room has been created on purpose, for a purpose. If you've trusted Christ as your Savior, God has put a call on your life. He has invited you to be part of something that is bigger than all of us, to be part of something that will still matter 1000 years from now. The question is, "Are you adequate for your calling?" Well, that's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Exodus, Chapter 4. Last week, we learned that after 40 years in the Sinai desert, God appeared to Moses and called him to be His guy to deliver the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. And Moses is absolutely overwhelmed by this call. Chapter 4, verse 1:

Then Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp *it* by its tail"—so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— "that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you." (*NASB, Exodus 4:1-5)

It's really not hard to identify with the inadequacies and the insecurities and the fears of Moses. What God has called him to is really overwhelming. Last time he tried to intervene was 40 years before, and it didn't go very well. So it's a legitimate question, "What if I show up and say, 'The Lord appeared to me in the desert.' And they say to me, 'No, he didn't.'" I mean, what's he going to say? "Yes, he did." (*laughter*) So, God responds, "Moses, what's that in your hand?" Well, it's a staff. That couldn't be more ordinary. A staff was standard equipment for every shepherd. But what God is going to have to teach Moses is that what's ordinary in your hand, will become extraordinary, in My hand.

So, he says, "**Throw it down**," and it becomes a **serpent**. It's the exact same Hebrew word used to describe the serpent in Genesis, chapter 3, both in the temptation and the serpent whose head would be crushed by the seed of Abraham. So, it again connects to this larger narrative that's going on through the Scriptures. So, Moses jumps back, and God says, "**Now grab it by the tail**," and it turns back into a **staff**.

One of the things we want to notice in this opening paragraph is the unusual redundancy of the word **hand**. It's actually inserted into the text in kind of a clumsy way, stated more often than would be necessary. So, look back at the text. God first asked, "What is that in your **hand**?" But then verse 4, "But the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your **hand** and grasp it'" He doesn't really need to say that; He could just say, "Grab it by the tail." Then the text says, "...so he stretched out his **hand** and caught it." You don't really need to say that, could just say, "He caught it." And then it says, "...It turned back into a staff in his **hand**." You don't have to say "in his **hand**" again.

There's some point being made here. The Hebrew people will not be delivered from bondage by the **hand** of Moses, but only by the **hand** of God. Moses is an ordinary guy, just like that's an ordinary staff. But an ordinary guy, in the **hand** of God, can do extraordinary things. The **hand** is often a reference to power, like when the Old Testament talks about the **hand of God**. So, this is the lesson that Moses has to learn, and I think the staff is the symbol of this lesson: "Don't ever forget this." Verse 6:

The LORD furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom." So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like *the rest of his flesh*. "If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign. But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground." (Vs. 6-9)

Now, this is kind of an odd second sign. Couldn't you come up with something a little more dramatic? But, again, it's this focus on his **hand**. "Stick your **hand** in your bosom, pull it out, and it's diseased." It could have been leprous, but it doesn't have to be, because the Hebrew word is more general than that. Whatever it is, it's messed up. "Then stick your **hand** back in your bosom, pull it out again, and your **hand** has been made well." In some ways, this is almost a picture of Moses himself. Moses is diseased; Moses is imperfect, like all of us. But God is the One that's going to make Moses what he needs to be in order to accomplish the mission. But God says, "If they don't listen and believe with the first two signs, then you go down to the Nile, get some water from the river, pour it on the bank, and the water will become blood on the ground." This third sign Moses is going to have to take by faith, because they don't practice it.

The Nile was the lifeblood of Egypt. I think it would be correct to say it was the Nile River that made Egypt, Egypt—this constant flow of fresh water. So, it had a lot to do with their gods and their beliefs and their powers. So, for the God of the Hebrews to turn their river into blood, was clear evidence that that God of the Hebrews is greater than the God of the Egyptians. So there's a lot of symbolism in all of that. Verse 10:

Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Literally have the of speech and heavy of tongue). The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes *him* mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say. (Vs. 10-12)

Now Moses is wrestling with his adequacy to speak. "Lord, I'm not very good at talking." Historically, a lot of people have understood this as some sort of a speech impediment, like a stutter, but there's no real reason from the text to take it that way. As a matter of fact, Stephen in Acts 7 says that *Moses is powerful in both word and deed*. And throughout the book of Exodus, he's going to give some really good speeches. Literally the Hebrew is "I am not a man of words,"

not very good at talking. Some people think it might have been an issue with the language. Like, what language does Moses speak? He grew up in the house of Pharaoh. Certainly he speaks Egyptian. Does he speak Hebrew? Now he's been 40 years in the Sinai desert with a bunch of sheep. Now, I suppose these speak *sheep*. (*laughter*) But it may have just been an inadequacy with the language. But God says, "Moses, who made your mouth? Who made your tongue, your eyes, your ears? It's Me. I've got this. I'm going to take care of you. You just have to trust Me." The theme there is Moses keeps saying, "But I'm inadequate. I don't talk very good. I'm not right for the job." And God keeps saying, "But I will...I will...I will. You just have to trust Me." Verse 13:

But he said, "Please, Lord, now send *the message* by whomever You will."

I think the way that's translated can be confusing. It almost sounds like Moses is conceding, "God, send it to **whomever You will** and if that's me, okay." But that's not what he's saying. What he's saying is, "I won't do it; send someone else." If you have an NIV translation, I think it says, "Please, Lord, send someone else," which very well captures the Hebrew. This now is not an issue of inadequacy. It's not an issue of insecurity. This is just disobedience. Moses is just saying, "I won't do it." One of the things that's interesting in verse 13, is this is the first time in this chapter that Lord is capital L, small, o, r, d. When Lord is all caps, it's indicative of the Hebrew "Yahweh", I AM," that Jeff talked about last week. Whether Moses actually uses this lesser name for God, or whether the writer is simply putting it in there to reflect Moses is still with a lower view of God, it's very strategically placed. Moses still doesn't trust God. So, he says, "I won't do it." Verse 14:

Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses...

It's one thing to feel inadequate, to wrestle with our own insecurities. It's something different to disobey. Disobedience is an attitude of the heart. It's an unwillingness to trust God. "Nope, just won't do it." One of the things that Moses is going to have to learn, or this isn't going to work, and that is that God is God, and Moses is not. And if God says it, you do it. If you're going to be My guy, and we're going to do this thing, then you have to obey Me. That's the only way this is going to work.

Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."
(Vs. 14-17)

So, this doesn't need to be taken as some sort of a concession to Moses' refusal. There's no "therefore," or "so," or "because of". As a matter of fact, the way it flows, it's better taken as God saying, "Moses, I've already got this. Aaron is already on his way. I already have a plan. You just need to trust Me." It's difficult to figure out how much relationship there was between Moses and his brother, Aaron. Moses has been out in the desert for 40 years. It's highly unlikely Moses and Aaron would have been together. How much contact they had during the 40 years that Moses was

in Pharaoh's house is very difficult to figure out. But, whatever, God has talked to Aaron, Aaron is on the way out, and Aaron is really good at talking.

So God says, "Here's how we're going to do this. I'm going to talk to you. You talk to Aaron. Aaron will talk to the people." As a matter of fact, the text says, "*Aaron's going to be like your mouth, and you're going to be like God to him.*" In other words, God isn't bypassing Moses to talk to Aaron. God is going to give the message to Moses. Moses is going to tell it to Aaron, and Aaron better stick to the script, because these aren't just Moses' words. These are God's words.

One of the things I love about this part of the story is how willing God is to stick with His guy. Moses has all kinds of insecurities. He has all kinds of inadequacies. He has all kinds of excuses. And anywhere along the way, God could have said, "Moses, you're such a loser; I'm going with a different guy." But He doesn't. God is so patient, and He's so responsive to Moses' questions and concerns and inadequacies. And little by little, God is schooling Moses on what it means to trust Him. This is the wilderness school of leadership, and we have a front row seat to what God is doing in Moses. And before God is done, Moses will become one of the greatest leaders in human history.

This is the end of the narrative flow of this chapter. It kind of comes to a close, and then I'll explain the rest of the chapter. You would think with all the drama and the back and forth, that the narrative flow would end with some dramatic moment. But here's how it ends. "Oh, and, Moses, by the way, don't forget your staff." This staff is symbolic of this lesson that Moses has to learn, "Moses, this won't be by your **hand**. This will be by God's **hand**. You're ordinary, just like that staff is ordinary." But God has a habit of taking the ordinary and doing something extraordinary. So, Moses will keep this staff with him throughout the book of Exodus.

The end of the chapter presents four scenes in four different locations that tell us something we need to know. It doesn't really flow in order and doesn't really flow like a story. There are just four scenes to tell us something. First one, verse 18:

Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand. (Vs. 18-20)

So, the first scene is Moses comes from Mount Horeb, from Sinai, and comes back to Midian, and wants the blessing of his father-in-law to move his family back to Egypt. There was probably a lengthier conversation, but as is typical in these narratives, you just get a summary. And Jethro says, in essence, "Go with my blessing." Oh and, by the way, "Don't forget your staff." But what's interesting about that statement is it's the first time in the text, it says, "**God's staff**," which again I think is symbolic in a way. Moses is God's staff. He's the ordinary, that God is going to use for something extraordinary. This is God. Moses is God's staff, and God is going to do something. Next scene, verse 21:

The LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power...” (Vs 21a)

In my opinion, that's an unfortunate translation, because it's the Hebrew word for "**hand**." It's not the word for "**power**." "I have put in your **hand**." It's the exact same word. Again, this message, that it's by the **hand** of God that he will deliver His people. **But...** he says:

...but I will harden his (Pharaoh's) heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, ‘Let My son go that he may serve Me’; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.”’” (Vs. 21b-23)

So, what does it mean that God *will harden Pharaoh's heart*? As the story progresses, there's about seven times where the text, in one way or another, will say, "*Pharaoh hardened his own heart*." But there's also a couple of times where we will be told, "*God hardened Pharaoh's heart*." As is often the case in Scripture, there's this ongoing tension between a sovereign God and people who exercise their will before God. I think what it means when, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart," is that God is going to make His power and presence clearly known before Pharaoh. And in that moment, Pharaoh cannot remain neutral. Either he must acknowledge that the God of the Hebrews is God, and I'm not, or he can stubbornly refuse what is so obvious and say, "The God of the Hebrews is not God. I'm God." But every time he refuses, his heart gets a little harder; he gets a little more stubborn. It becomes a little less likely he's going to listen. So, God hardened his heart by revealing His power and presence to Pharaoh.

God then refers to Israel as "**My son**," what we call a collective, singular—the nation together. “That's My son, My firstborn, My preeminent son. These are My people. So, Pharaoh, this is My son, and you have no right to hold him in bondage. So I'm telling you, you need to let My son go. But because you refuse, then I'm going to kill your son...your first born!” It's a lot of drama that's going to unfold in the weeks ahead. Verse 24:

Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, “You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.” So He let him alone. At that time she said, “*You are a bridegroom of blood*”—because of the circumcision. (Vs. 24-26)

Now, the meaning of that paragraph is so clear and obvious, I don't know that we even need to talk about it. (*laughter*) But just in case it's not, let me make a few comments. This paragraph is believed to be the most confusing, difficult paragraph in the entire book of Exodus. There are so many questions and issues that, ultimately, it's impossible to resolve. But I do think there is a point that isn't so difficult to understand. So, let's walk through it a little bit. If, in these verses, 24 through 26, you see the name **Moses**, it's important to understand the name **Moses** doesn't appear in these verses in the Hebrew. All you have is a male masculine pronoun. So, that's simply the translator guessing that it's a reference to Moses. So, they're on their way to Egypt. They stop at what we would refer to as a campground, and the Lord is going to kill somebody. He's either going to kill Moses or He's going to kill Moses' son. It's just a male pronoun. For some reason, Zipporah

immediately knows what the problem is, and she immediately jumps into action and circumcises Moses' son. She takes the foreskin and either *throws* it at Moses' feet, or their son's feet. Or the Hebrew could equally be translated, "She *laid* it at Moses' feet, or the son's feet." If she's disgusted and mad, she's throwing it. If she's relieved, then she's laying it. And, ultimately, then God relents, because of the circumcision.

Now, here's what we do know for sure. Moses and his family are on the way to Egypt, and for whatever reason, his son is not circumcised. And God is saying, "Moses, you are going to lead My son, My people, out of Egypt. They are My son. They are My covenant people, and the sign of the covenant is circumcision. And as long as your son isn't circumcised, he's outside the covenant. So, he will die. So, Moses, somebody is going to die." For some reasons, Zipporah understands what this is, immediately does the circumcision, and God relents. This is the second time in this chapter where there's been a very clear message, "Moses, if this is going to work, if you're going to be My guy, if we're going to do this thing, you've got to be clear about this. You must obey me. This is not negotiable. You do what I tell you. You can't go to Egypt with a son that isn't circumcised." Inadequacy is one thing. Insecurity is one thing. Fear is one thing. But obedience is a heart issue, and God is making it clear, "If you're going to be My guy, you have to obey Me, or this isn't going to work." Verse 27:

Now the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which He had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned (had compassion for) the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped. (Vs. 27-31)

So, Moses and Aaron meet. They traveled to Egypt, and they gather the elders of Israel. They give them the word; they show them the signs, and the people believe. They understand now that God has heard their cries, that God has compassion on them, that God cares for them, and that God is ready to do something to deliver them from Egypt. So, **they bowed low and worshiped**. Well, that went nicely. That went about as good as it possibly could have, which is a huge relief because I'm pretty sure it's smooth sailing from here on out, right? (*laughter*) You'll have to come back next week to find out.

As we wrap this up this morning, Moses' journey is quite remarkable. He's born a little Hebrew baby that, by Pharaoh's orders, was supposed to be thrown in the river and put to death. But instead, his mom puts him in a little ark and puts him beside the Nile in the reeds. Of all people, Pharaoh's daughter finds him and adopts him to be her own, and he grows up in the household of Pharaoh. He goes out to do something positive, but rather makes a mess of things, fears for his life, and flees into the Midian desert, and for the next 40 years is chasing sheep in the desert. Then God shows up in this burning bush and calls him to something extraordinary. Moses is overwhelmed. He's struggling with his own inadequacies, his own insecurities. But what God is determined to teach him is, "Moses, the people of God are not going to be delivered by *your hand*. It will be *My hand*,

and you have to trust Me!" And the staff will be symbolic: that God has a habit of taking the ordinary and doing something extraordinary!

And so it is with us. If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, God has put a call on your life. It's a call to be part of something that's bigger than all of us. It's a call to be part of something that will still matter 1000 years from now. Are you adequate for your call? Of course not...of course not! None of us are. If you think you're adequate, one of two things has happened. Either you've shrunk the call down to something so much less than what God intended, and you think you can pull it off, or you have a grossly exaggerated view of your own adequacy. The reality is: none of us are adequate...but God is! The mission won't be accomplished by *my hand*, but by *God's hand*. I'm like the staff in His **hand**...really ordinary...that God wants to use to do something extraordinary!

It would be easy at this point to say, "Nice sermon, Pastor; let's close in prayer and go to lunch." But let's just take a minute to be a little more honest. Is that really how you live? Can you really, honestly say you live with a sense of purpose and mission every day? When was the last time you were truly overwhelmed by what God was calling you to do, and you knew that if God doesn't show up, you are toast? Part of the faith walk, part of what God has called us to, is to live out beyond ourselves and our own inadequacies. It's a journey that is both terrifying and exhilarating. Life is short, and you only get one shot at it. And I'm telling you, it's really easy to piddle your days away, just going from day to day to day. God has called you to live on mission. God has called you to live with purpose. There should be nights when you lie awake at night, and you're overwhelmed by the gravity of what God has called you to, and you realize, "God, if You don't show up, there's no way this is going to happen!" Because God has called us to be part of something that's still going to matter 1000 years from now. My prayer is you will choose to listen to the call. Whatever it is that's in *your hand*, whatever that is for you, God wants to take you...pretty ordinary...and do something...extraordinary! But just a reminder: If you choose to listen and obey the call, I just want to remind you, "Don't forget your staff!"

Our Father, we're so thankful this morning that You have called us to live our lives with purpose and meaning. Lord, it's just so easy these days, to whine and to complain, and get caught up in all the stuff that defines our culture, and to miss that You have called us to be agents of change in this needy world. Lord, may we listen and obey. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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Introduction

Exodus 4 continues the dialogue between Moses and God that began in chapter 3. As Moses poses one excuse after another, God engages Him with proof of His power to deliver the Hebrew people. In this exchange we come to learn more about our God who sees, hears, and responds to each of us.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

- 1) What's the most recent project or idea to which you gave 100% effort? Share some results or take-aways you learned.

- 2) If you could summarize the past week in one word, what would that be? Share a bit more about your answer if you'd like.

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
 - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
 - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
 - c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
 - 2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.
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Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

- 1) Exodus 4 continues the conversation that God initiates with Moses from a burning bush. **What did you learn about God in this dialogue? What did you learn about Moses?**
- 2) In Exodus 4:1-9, God encourages Moses to lead by showing His power through signs. **What is Moses' response in verse 10?**

Read God's reply in verses 11-12. Notice that Moses says, "I am ..." (to rebut his qualifications) and God says, "I will". **What does this teach us about our adequacy to fulfill God's calling?**

If you are willing, share about a time when have you felt inadequate for a task or role God encouraged you to step into. (Did you argue with God? Were you met with failure? Did it strengthen your faith?)

- 3) We're told in Exodus 4:14-17 that "the anger of the LORD burned against Moses". **What caused the LORD's anger with Moses?**

As Moses walked away from the burning bush and the LORD'S burning anger, consider what he might have felt about God's call to deliver the Hebrew people from Pharaoh/Egypt. **What do you think God was teaching Him through this encounter?**

- 4) Even before Moses approaches Pharaoh, God says that he will "harden [Pharaoh's] heart, so that he will not let the people go" (4:21). **How did Pastor Bryan explain what this passage means? What can we learn about how God interacts with people from this example?**

- 5) Exodus 4:24–26 can be a confusing passage because our modern practices are different from the way circumcision was viewed in ancient times. Read Genesis 17:9-14 for context related to circumcision and the covenant of God. **What does this teach us about the weight of leadership upon those whom God calls to lead?**

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

Scripture Focus: We all struggle with feelings of inadequacy at some point. Scripture reminds us that God is more than adequate to meet the challenges before us; we are simply to entrust ourselves to Him. Read *2 Corinthians 3:4-6* as a strong reminder that your adequacy is in Christ alone.

Prayer Focus: Listening to God. Prayer isn't a one-way expression on our part but also a time for us to listen. We won't likely hear God call to us from a burning bush as Moses did, but we can take time to be silent before God at regular intervals, like first thing each morning or at the end of each day. Choose one of those times and set a reminder to pause daily this week. Simply pray, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

Plan to spend 5-10 minutes actively listening to God. You may find yourself distracted during this time. That's okay, just release the thoughts back to God and pray again, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." The point is to practice turning your attention to God. Every time you get distracted is an opportunity to turn your attention back to God.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of "coming together" is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say "Amen" aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?