

OVERCOMING THE RESISTANCE

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



Catalog No. 20221002
Exodus 4:1-31
Fourth Message
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October 2, 2022

Exodus 4:1-31

Here at PBC, when a couple wants to get married, we, as pastors, start a series of premarital counseling sessions with them. The content of these sessions varies a bit from couple to couple or pastor to pastor, but communication is always one of the topics discussed.

When my wife Linzy and I were first dating, I remember being told that good communication was critical to the health of a relationship. At 20 years old, as I was falling in love with this beautiful young girl, I did not really understand why this needed to be said. Linzy and I could spend hours talking day after day. Isn't communication just what people do in a relationship?

Well, sure, but there is much more to communication than just talking with each other. There is good communication and bad communication. There is surface-level communication and deep communication. There is communication that leads to misunderstanding and hurt feelings, as well as moments of vulnerability and intimacy. Communicating well is hard. But communication is also only half the picture in a healthy relationship.

Imagine that Linzy asks me if I can take out the trash, and I say, Oh, I'm sorry, I'm just too busy in this season to take out the trash. Or maybe, Taking out the trash isn't really my gift. I have other strengths. I'm sure someone else with the gift of trash-taker-outer would be better suited for that. You might be getting the sense that communication is not our only issue here. These are starting to sound like excuses.

Isn't this what we do in our relationship with God sometimes? We say that we are having a hard time hearing from God. We are not sure what he is calling us to or what he wants us to do in any given situation. Communication is hard. It can be really difficult to hear from God. But communication is only half the picture. If we are not willing to follow God in faith and obedience, knowing what God wants us to do will not get us very far.

Last week, as we looked at Exodus 3, we saw God speak to Moses in a very direct way. God spoke to Moses

from a burning bush and called him to be the one to deliver God's people from slavery in Egypt. The message was crystal clear.

Wouldn't you love it if God spoke to you that way? You open your front door, and your rosemary bush is on fire, and God speaks from the bush and says, It's time to quit your job.

Here is the crazy thing, though—and this is what we will look at today: even if God spoke to us that way, we all have resistance to following God in faith and obedience. That resistance holds us back. It stunts our growth. This morning, we are going to think about that resistance together. Where does it come from? What is really going on inside of us? How does God want to help us overcome that resistance?

We are going to be in Exodus 4 this morning. This chapter continues God's conversation with Moses at the burning bush. Moses has already asked God a few questions, and now we will see some resistance emerging in him.

Facing his doubt

Exodus 4:1:

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they [that is, the people of Israel] will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'"

Remember, God has just told Moses from the burning bush to go tell both his fellow Hebrews and Pharaoh himself that God wants to deliver his people from slavery. Here, Moses objects. The people will never believe that you have sent me. This objection from Moses seems reasonable at first. After all, the Hebrew people had been enslaved for 400 years. During that time, they had stopped hearing from God. Then Moses (who was raised as an Egyptian, not a Hebrew) shows up, claiming that God has spoken to him. You can see why the people might have a hard time believing this.

But in chapter 3, when God first told Moses to return to Egypt, God explicitly told him that the people would listen to him. Let's look again at chapter 3.

Exodus 3:16-18a God said:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, "The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, 17 and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey." 18 And they will listen to your voice...

God had already made it clear to Moses that the people would listen to him. Just after this, God tells him that Pharaoh will not listen to him. But the people, they will listen to him.

Moses does not believe it. We see Moses here wrestling with doubt. The first thing that keeps Moses from obeying God is his doubt. He does not believe what God has said will happen will actually happen. It seems too unlikely. Too risky. Why would the people believe him? The last time Moses saw them, they were afraid of him. They saw him as the enemy. Why would they believe him now? Moses doubted that God knew what he was talking about.

Do you ever find yourself doubting God? You sense that he is calling you to something, but it seems unlikely that that thing could ever happen. That is where Moses found himself.

But God does not condemn Moses for his doubt. Rather, he gives him three miraculous signs to help him overcome his doubt.

Exodus 4:2-9:

The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." 3 And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. 4 But the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— 5 "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." 6 Again, the Lord said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. 7 Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. 8 "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. 9 If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

God gives Moses three miraculous signs. In each of these cases, God takes something ordinary and uses it to do something extraordinary. A stick, a hand, and water. It is hard to imagine anything more ordinary than those things. You see, God wanted Moses to know, and he wanted us to know, that he can take ordinary things and use them for extraordinary things.

Does anyone here feel ordinary? I do. I am sure some of you do as well. But that will not stop the Lord.

Immobilized by fear

For Moses, there is more going on than just his doubt. There is something else holding him back from following God. Look at his second objection in v. 10.

Exodus 4:10:

But Moses said to the Lord, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."

Moses was not just wrestling with his doubt. He was also wrestling deeply with his own insecurities and fears. Literally, Moses says, "I am not a man of words." God, you have called me to go and speak to the people of Israel and to speak to Pharaoh, but you do not understand. I am not a man of words. That is not my gift; that is not my strength.

We do not know precisely why Moses felt insecure about his ability to speak. Possibly, he had a stutter or speech impediment of some kind. It is possible that he

felt rusty with his Hebrew or his Egyptian. Maybe he just doubted his own ability to turn a phrase or speak in a winsome way. Whatever the reason, Moses feels insecure about his ability to accomplish what God has called him to. He is afraid.

We often think of fear as a bad thing. But is fear really bad?

I have often run at Rancho San Antonio or some other Open Space Preserve nearby, and I suddenly see what looks to be a snake in the middle of the trail in front of me. Usually, it is just a root pretending to be a snake, but it doesn't matter. My response is the same every time. I jump, I let out a gasp, and my heartbeat increases by about 20 beats per minute. It is terrifying.

What is happening at that moment? There are a few ways to describe what is happening. One way is to describe the emotion I am feeling, which is fear. Fear is the emotional response we have to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, whether that threat is real or perceived. That root was not going to hurt me, but I perceived that it might be a rattlesnake about to strike, so I was afraid.

But there is a physiological side to fear as well. When I perceived this potential rattlesnake as a threat, my sympathetic nervous system jumped into full gear, and my body released a large amount of cortisol into my bloodstream. Cortisol is often referred to as the "stress hormone." It is what causes your heart to start beating faster. It also causes your airways to relax, so your lungs get more oxygen. It sharpens your vision and hearing and makes you more alert. It directs blood away from your brain and into your arms and legs, leaving you slightly less rational but better equipped to run or fight.

We call this the fight-or-flight response. It is that feeling you get before a big presentation at work, as you walk into a final exam, or when your spouse or significant other says, "We need to talk." It is also the feeling that I get every time I am about to walk up on this stage to preach. My heart beats a little faster, my focus gets sharper, and my body gets ready for action.

You see, fear itself is not a bad thing. In fact, fear is good, even necessary. That fight-or-flight response might save your life the next time you see a rattlesnake.

But fear can also be crippling. It can be debilitating. The problem with Moses is not that he is afraid. The problem is that he has chosen flight over fight. Instead

of allowing his fear to let him run into what God had prepared for him, he let his fear cause him to run from God and his plans.

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt God asking you to move in a direction that felt scary? Maybe it was something as simple as starting a conversation with someone, building a relationship in order to love someone and share Jesus with them. Maybe it was something bigger, such as giving up a higher-paying job that is robbing you of joy for one that is more conducive to you and your family experiencing peace and rest. Have you ever felt God asking you to move in a direction that felt scary? I have. Many times. That fear is not bad. It is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to put yourself in a position where you can watch God do something incredible.

But God does not ask us to jump into action without him. He promises to go with us.

Look at how God responds to Moses' fear in verses 11-12.

Exodus 4:11-12:

Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

Here is a promise from God, amid our fear, that he will not call us to something for which he will not equip us. He will not send us somewhere where he will not go with us. If God is calling you into something that feels scary, he is also promising you to equip and be with you in that place. He does not send you alone. He does not send you unprepared. He sends you with his Spirit. And he will give you what you need to accomplish exactly what he has prepared for you.

This was God's promise to Moses, and this is his promise to us.

The real problem: hardness of heart

Awesome. Moses has expressed his doubt, and God has shown him miracles to overcome that doubt. Moses has expressed his fear, and God has given him a reason for faith in the midst of the fear. Now Moses is ready to march back to Egypt and lead his people to freedom with boldness and confidence.

Not quite. There is another layer of resistance in Moses' heart, a layer of resistance that we may find in our hearts as well.

Look at what Moses says in Exodus 4:13.

Exodus 4:13:

But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else."

In other words, "I don't want to." God, I don't to go. I don't to give up my comfortable life out here in Midian, with my family and my sheep. I like it here. Send someone else. I don't want to do it.

When we peel back the layers of our doubt and fear, sometimes all we are left with is the reality of the hardness of our own hearts. Maybe you have heard about the various ministry needs here at PBC over the past few months: serving in children's ministry or as a youth leader, being involved in foster care, or something else. Or maybe it is something outside the walls of this church: getting involved in ministry to the unhoused or stepping into a messy situation in the life of a coworker. Maybe you have even felt the Lord pulling you toward one of these opportunities, and you have found yourself, like Moses, making excuses for why you are not the right person for the job. I am not good with kids. I don't know the Bible well enough. I don't have enough time. It's not my gift. I am sure there is someone else who could do it better.

If you peel back the layers of those excuses—excuses that are probably rooted in doubt or fear—I wonder if, at the end of the day, you might find that you just don't want to do it. Could it be that there is some hardness in your heart? A lack of desire to step out in faith? A reluctance to put the call of God above your own comfort and security?

I have been there. I first started feeling called to pastoral ministry when I was 15 years old. I was a freshman in high school. For me, it started as just an idea that popped into my head at a youth conference. The speaker at this conference challenged us to consider whether God was calling us into vocational ministry, and the thought entered my head, I think God wants me to be a pastor. I had never once considered this before, and I just set this aside as a strange thought that was from me and not from God. I was having a hard time hearing from God.

Over the course of a few months, this thought kept coming back. That following summer, I was on a mission trip to Mexico, and on that trip, the sense of God's call became so strong that I could not deny it anymore. I knew that this was God speaking to me, calling me. I was full of doubt. Who am I to be a pastor? To stand up in front of people and teach the Bible? Could God really work through me? I was also full of fear. I was terrified. I was terrified of what people would think of me—a 15 year-old-kid telling people that I had heard God call me to be a pastor. My friends would think I am crazy! There were all kinds of other fears also. Fears of financial insecurity. Fears of spiritual warfare. Fears of my own inadequacies.

Do you know what else I realized on that mission trip? I realized that I just really did not want to be a pastor. I did not want to step out in faith and follow God down this path. I did not want to be obedient to the call that God had placed on my life. There was a hardness in my heart.

Have you ever been confronted with the hardness of your own heart? Have you ever had one of those moments where you realize at the end of the day that you do not want to follow God? You do not want to obey him?

How do you think God responds to that hardness in your heart?

The grace to keep going

In verses 14-17, we see how God responded to the hardness in Moses' heart.

Exodus 4:14-17:

Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. 16 He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. 17 And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

God's response to Moses here is fascinating. First, as God hears about Moses' unwillingness to obey, his

anger is kindled. It is as if he says, That is not right. That is good. That is not what I have asked of you. But what does God do in his anger? Does he slap Moses and tell him to shape up? Does he throw Moses aside and find someone else? No! He gives Moses the grace that he needs to keep going. He gives him Aaron. He says, Take your brother with you. He can do the talking. And I'll be with you both, teaching you both what to say and do.

God knew the exact gift of grace that Moses needed to find the faith to keep moving forward in obedience, and he gave him Aaron. He knew exactly what Moses needed, and he gave it to him. God knows the exact gift of grace you need to find the faith to keep moving forward in obedience. And he wants to give it to you.

So let me ask you this question: What gift of grace do you need? What do you need to happen in your life or in your heart so that you can say "yes" to that nudge that God has put on your heart, that opportunity that he has put on your mind, or that person that he has placed in your life? What gift of grace do you need?

One evening, on that mission trip, when I was 16 years old, we had a worship night. As everyone was singing, I was kneeling down in the front row, having this conversation. God, I know you are calling me to be a pastor, but I just don't think I can do it. I am so scared. And I just don't want to. I was weeping and shaking with emotion when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was a staff member from the missions organization whom I had never met. After I calmed down enough to speak, I told him a little about what was happening. He said, "God wanted me to come over to you and share two things. The first is a verse. Joshua 1:9, 'Have I not commanded you, be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.' Second, he wanted me to tell you that he was going to use you for big things in his kingdom." I was blown away — not at the thought of the "big things" that might be coming, but because God knew that that word was exactly what I needed to be able to say yes to him. That was exactly what I needed to find enough faith to keep moving forward in obedience. It was his gift of grace to me.

So I ask you again: what gift of grace do you need? You might not even know. You might have no idea what you need to get past your fear and doubt and the

hardness of your heart and lean into whatever God is calling you to. But know this: God knows. God knows exactly what you need and wants to give it to you.

In the rest of Exodus 4, Moses returns to Midian, gathers his wife and children, and heads back to Egypt, ready to do what God has asked of him. On the way, he meets Aaron. Together, they gather the elders of Israel. They do the signs God had given Moses, and here is how the chapter ends.

Exodus 4:31:

And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

It worked. At least phase one worked. Moses and Aaron hadn't talked to Pharaoh yet, but the people of Israel believed. They worshipped God for the first time we have a record of in a long, long time.