

Beating about the bush



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by Brian Johnston



Introduction

One recollection I have from early school days is of our class giving a performance on parents' night. We were to sing a piece called 'All through the night'. I vividly recall the headmaster introducing the piece before we performed it. He began by saying we were going to sing all through the night, then hastened to explain he didn't mean we were going to sing all through the night, but simply that we were going to sing all through the night! I think the parents understood by then that 'All through the night' was the name of the piece we were going to sing. Perhaps, it was his annual joke.

I ought not, of course, to be critical - especially as I am going to repeat his technique, well almost. I'd like to introduce this series by saying that I'll be beating about the bush in order not to beat about the bush! If you're not familiar with the expression - because, thank God, our Search for Truth programme reaches into every continent - then allow me to explain that from ancient times in bird hunting some participants set the birds to flight by beating about the bushes with sticks while others caught them in nets. So beating about the bush was literally something which led up to the main activity which was, of course, catching the birds. A speaker, therefore, who never gets to the

main point of what he should be saying, might be said to be 'beating about the bush'.

So when I say I'm going to beat about the bush in order not to beat about the bush, I mean I want to get to the main point of our Bible text, but the text we'll be examining is the one that concerns Moses and the burning bush. We'll be trying to beat out some lessons from the surrounding verses.

Let's turn to it and read about it now. But just before we do, let me say this - about why I want to share this series with you. Many of you who listen may be considering taking up fresh responsibilities in following and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. And, when anyone stands at the threshold of an exciting new phase of service for the Lord, it can be a bit daunting. There's nothing unusual, or even wrong about that. In fact, it can be a healthy sign. Great heroes of the Bible, like Gideon and Jeremiah - to name but two - needed God's encouragement before launching out on their life's work.

Moses, too, felt that way. So let's learn how God graciously dealt with him, knowing he'll be as gracious with us too. We've set the scene, now let's read the first three verses of Exodus chapter 3:

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of

Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." (Exodus 3:1-3)

You'll notice our story is set in the wild west - the west side of the wilderness, that is. And we might say: God is the God of the wild west, for he's the one who's going to be calling the shots, by telling Moses what to do.

But you might say, wait a minute, we've read about the angel of the LORD, not about God. So, let's be clear about this: whenever in the Old Testament we read about 'the angel of the LORD' on an occasion like this, these were in actual fact, manifestations of God himself, as the next verses make absolutely clear:

When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!"

And he said, "Here I am."

Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God

of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:4-6)

Before we finish, we come back for a third short reading from Exodus chapter 3. It's one that will bring us to the message God had for Moses, and the mission he was giving him to perform. But - before we get there, let's just say - it was a mission Moses was very reluctant to take on, so he made five excuses - and we're going to consider them one by one in this study. This is because they're typical of the excuses we may tend to make when we're asked to take on some duty in service for the Lord. But more of that later ...

First, in this introductory chapter, we really ought to refresh our memories all about the background to this very special meeting Moses had with God at the burning bush. A very handy summary is found in the Book of Acts chapter 7 - words spoken by Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who said:

"... Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died ... there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. And after he had been set

outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?'

"At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'

"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years." (Acts 7:15-36)

Moses is standing on the brink of the final third of his life. He's now 80, and he'll be 120 when he dies. But his real life's work hasn't even begun yet. That, however, is going to change, that's why the Lord has come down to meet him in the flame of a burning thorn bush – so he could say to Moses:

"I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey ... Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the

oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7-10)

There, at last, is the mission God has for Moses. He's to go back to the country he ran away from 40 years before, and this time he's to bring all his countrymen out of it with him. He's only being asked to free the Israelite slaves from the power of

Pharaoh, who's at the head of the great world super-power then!

It's a prospect that makes Moses go weak at the knees. Before long, he's trotted out no less than five excuses, but God has an answer for each one. Maybe it will help us if, in the next five chapters, we look at each excuse in turn and study what God has to say. We may find that we, too, will be helped to take on that challenging new role that seems so daunting to us right now!

1. "I'm a nobody"

We live in an image-conscious world. People like to look good. And this world affords some great sights: some natural, some man-made. Take, for example, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the Grand Canyon, the leaning tower of Pisa, to name a few ...

But in this study we're focusing on something that's nothing to look at: an ordinary, dry bush - a clump of dead twigs. Yet, strangely enough, it's described as being a 'marvellous sight'. The clump of dry twigs is, of course, the burning bush at which Moses met with God, as recorded in Exodus chapter 3:

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." (Exodus 3:1-3)

It wasn't the fact that the bush was burning which drew Moses' attention. I suppose he would have seen plenty bushes catching fire in the baking heat of the desert. No, it

was the fact that this bush went on burning, without being consumed. This was neither the usual, nor the natural, sequence of events. How could it be possible? Moses drew closer, and that's when God spoke to him out of the middle of the bush.

Graciously, God had chosen something as ordinary as a dry bush to be the vehicle for his revelation to Moses. I want to pause there with Moses, because perhaps you feel that God would never use anyone as ordinary as yourself in order to reveal himself to someone else.

But I'd like to say to you, based on this incident, that God is into some very ordinary things! In fact, God wants ordinary – he'll supply the extra! As I write this, I'm reminded of one response which reached us from a Search For Truth listener who was on death row in a Zambian prison. He wrote in to say that he had got saved - he had received Christ as personal Saviour by faith and knew his sins were all forgiven. He wrote this rather touching thing: 'Although I'm a nobody waiting to die – the Son of God loved this nobody and already died for me.'

When I think of ordinary people leading extraordinary lives, I think of my friends in the Church of God in Tagum, deep in the south of the

Philippines. From simple bamboo and coconut lumber shacks with uneven dry mud floors, there emerges the triumphant grace of God in hearts that are burning for the gospel. Yes, God's into some very ordinary things – making them into a marvellous sight! They are sights which have enriched my life, causing me to draw near and worship God for his marvellous grace.

"Can your Jesus save someone like me?" is what a man called Stephen Lungu once asked a South African preacher. "Yes," came the reply, along with a request to share a bit of information on Lungu's background. As Stephen told of his rejection, the preacher himself began to cry. "Young man," he said, "I shall now tell you a story. Many years ago there was a 14-year-old girl who became pregnant." He went on to tell of how the father refused to take responsibility, so the girl dumped the baby in a toilet, but someone heard it drowning and rescued it, taking it to hospital. "I was that child," the preacher said. Stephen stared at him in astonishment. The preacher then read to him Psalm 27 verse 10: "Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up."

Hearing that verse became the changing point in Stephen's life. "God," he cried, "I have nothing. I am nothing. I can't read. I can't write. My parents don't want me. Take me up, God, take me up. I'm sorry for the bad things I've done. Jesus, forgive

me, and take me now." A throw-away child among the millions of Africa, but Jesus had found him – and turned his life round. To this day he tells others, all across Africa and beyond, of how God took him up.

These were people 'on-fire', but with no 'burn-out'. For when God is in something, it lasts. Nobodies in an image-conscious world, but transformed by the sheer grace of God into a marvellous sight through which others have come to know God.

Meanwhile, back at the burning bush, Moses still hadn't learnt the lesson. Here, again, was the mission God asked Moses to undertake:

When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!"

And he said, "Here I am."

Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

... "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land,

to a land flowing with milk and honey ... Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:4-10)

Why do I say that Moses still hadn't learnt his lesson? Simply because of Moses reply to God; he said: *"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"* (Exodus 3:11)

If only he'd considered God's use of a clump of dry twigs! However, this is the first of Moses' five excuses which we'll be looking at. Let's read it again:

"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

God's reply is so impressive.

And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:12-14)

Do you see what God is finally saying there in response to this first excuse of Moses? Moses has just said that he's a nobody; how could he possibly go into the presence of the king of Egypt, no less, and demand the freedom of all the king's slaves? In fact, he says to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" "Who am I?" Moses is obsessed with his weakness, his nothingness – compared to the king of Egypt.

But in verse 14, God says to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM". It's as if he says: "Moses it's not about who you are; but it's about WHO I AM! You may be just like this bunch of dry twigs, but I can use you!" An ordinary person for an extraordinary mission.

Whenever we find ourselves shrinking back from the call of God – whenever we make use of this same, first excuse which Moses made – whenever we're tempted to say, "Lord I can't do what you're asking me to do, because I'm just a nobody – then let's remember God's answer to Moses: It's not who I am, but it's all about Who God is. When we tell God we're not able because of who we are, we've simply missed the point. The God who calls us will also enable us to do his calling.

2. "I don't know"

Perhaps you stand at the brink of a new commitment in your life of following the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe you're being asked to take on some new responsibility in service for him. Understandably, you're feeling a bit daunted, nervous about this commitment.

In this study, we're aiming to draw practical help from the fact that Moses felt the same when God asked him to go into the palace of Pharaoh in Egypt and demand the release of his Israelite slaves.

Moses hesitates. We can probably sympathize with that. In answer to Moses' hesitation, God says:

"This shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain" (Exodus 3:12)

Moses was not immediately convinced and filled with courage. Because I share his weakness of faith, I think I can understand why! God was offering retrospective confirmation – for the sign would come after the event! Worshipping God back at this mountain again would be the sign that the whole thing had been of God. But, no doubt Moses is asking himself: "How does that help me right now?" It would be good to be sure after the event – but

I'd much rather have some reassurance now!

Perhaps, the basic lesson here is that God always asks us to take a step of faith. In many aspects of our service it's only as we look back later that we can clearly see the evidence of God's hand having guided us.

But to find out afterwards wasn't going to be enough for Moses. He ... *said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"* (Exodus 3:13)

Moses was even worried about the stage before getting to speak to Pharaoh. When he imagined his own people were checking out his credentials, he didn't feel he had all the answers for even them! So, basically, Moses' second excuse which he offers to God is: "Please don't send me. I can't go. I don't know enough yet."

We can understand that, I'm sure. If we're due to give some kind of presentation to a group of people, we wouldn't be very keen to do it if we believed they knew more about the topic of our talk than we did.

There's someone in John's Gospel chapter 9 that we should meet at this point. He's a man who started life

with a disadvantage – he was born blind. Then one day Jesus met him and healed him, and with this personal experience of going from minus to plus, the man became an inspiring example of a very focused witness when he later testified to having experienced at first-hand the power of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel writer, John, takes up the story:

... the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?"

Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him."

He said, "I am he."

Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?"

He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight."

Then they said to him, "Where is He?"

He said, "I do not know."

They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see."

Therefore some of the Pharisees said, "This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath."

Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?"

He said, "He is a prophet."

But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself."

His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner." [and when they said that, they were referring to Jesus]

He answered and said, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see."

Then they said to him again, "What

did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?"

He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?"

Then they reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from. "

The man answered and said to them, "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing." (John 9:8-33 NKJ)

This unnamed disciple is an inspiration to us all. He stuck to the one fact of his personal experience, and from there on in his logic was pretty good. I'm sure there are times when we all struggle to witness. We might easily think, "Oh, I don't know enough. If I were to speak up and declare my faith in Jesus, someone might ask me a question – and I wouldn't know the answer to it." Well, think about this. The man we've been reading about was a brand-new disciple. His knowledge of Jesus was virtually non-existent. But this incident – with his witness – is included in our Bibles as an example

of an effective witness to Jesus Christ!

When the religious leaders came calling, it seems he felt he couldn't cope with their theological arguments when they interrogated him about his encounter with Jesus.

But people can't argue successfully against a real personal experience. After all, we ought to know what's happened to ourselves better than anyone else does.

One man I read about was a well-known drunkard before he put his faith in Christ. It was then his life changed. He didn't waste money on alcohol any longer, which meant he could buy more of life's necessities – and perhaps a little more. His Bible knowledge was limited. Perhaps he'd never read of how Jesus' first miracle had been one of turning water into wine. You might think, then, that he was at a disadvantage when he was witnessing. But not at all, instead he told everyone who listened that the Lord had turned beer into furniture – as he told them of his own life's experience of Christ and what faith in him had meant to him.

And so it was with this man in John chapter 9. He didn't even know the basics about Jesus, but his answer to the sceptics was, "One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." Obviously, this was something he really was sure about. He'd known this life-changing experience - so it became the focus of his witness. It's the kind of powerful testimony from

experience that even the newest child of God can give. As believers, we've all got a story to tell: an experience of going from minus to plus – one which God can use to convince others.

So please don't use Moses' second

excuse of saying; "I don't know enough." In any work for God – whether it's witnessing or something else - it's not **what** you know, but **who** you know that counts.

3. "What will people

Some people have a hard time living down their past. Some have lived such a shameful past that those who have known them may find their new profession of Christianity hardly credible. "Surely not!" they say. "Not him!" or "Not her! I just don't believe it."

This was what Saul of Tarsus discovered after his conversion:

When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. (Acts 9:26)

And this, too, was the next problem Moses anticipated as he trotted out one excuse after another. You remember, he was trying to avoid the call of God at the time. It was when he was standing by the burning bush, and God was asking him to go and deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses imagined that events in his past would count against him.

But first, let's revise the story, using the history of events given by Stephen in the New Testament. He starts with the whole historical situation, which is handy – and, of course, he writes as a Jew:

"There arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. It was he who took shrewd

advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?'

"At this remark, Moses fled and

became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

"After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flaming of a burning thorn bush. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. But the LORD said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'

"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush." (Acts 7:18-35)

It's good to end our reading there, at the mention of the burning thorn bush, because in this study we're beating out lessons from the time Moses spent there with God. In particular, as you'll recall, we're studying the excuses Moses makes – the reasons he gives to God for not doing what God asks him to do. We're all rather good at that, so

hopefully, we can all learn from the way God graciously counters Moses' objections.

God was asking Moses to go back to Egypt – from where he'd fled 40 years earlier – and to become his people's deliverer from the slavery they were in there at the hands of Pharaoh. Moses now offers his third excuse, when he says:

"What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'" (Exodus 4:1)

Why was Moses worried about what his own people would say? Because they'd already doubted his good intentions. We read:

"And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand." (Acts 7:25)

That was 40 years ago, but I'm sure Moses remembered it like it was yesterday. He had already felt rejection from his own people, and he wasn't ready to repeat the dose. This episode of failure in his past haunted him now. It seems to be rubbed in as we ended our quotation from Stephen's speech:

"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush." (Acts 7:35)

The people had not believed Moses

before, and had not followed his leadership. They'd disowned him. Why should this time be any different?

Of course, this was now God's timing. God was now inviting – or rather commanding – Moses to act. This time it was not Moses' own initiative based on his wrong perception about what his people understood about him. But Moses had been scarred by that earlier rejection – and so we can, in part, sympathize with Moses' excuse – or at least the thinking behind it. He didn't want to be disowned again!

What other people will think or say about us, and this matter of living down our past are very real issues that we need to overcome if we're to move forward with God. And we can often – like Moses – be tempted to offer them as an excuse for our disobedience.

Even now, I can bring to mind a memorable afternoon as we sat together as a group, sharing God's Word. About fifteen to twenty of us had gathered under the porch of a house in the tropics. There was a good-natured atmosphere which made the time spent there immensely enjoyable, but what was most thrilling was a real sense that God's Word was being received as the voice of the living God. Here was a group engaging with the Bible as the Word of God. The sounds of a neighbour's karaoke machine and a passing rain-shower weren't

sufficient to distract us that afternoon. Questions came pouring out, and again and again we turned to the most relevant Bible verses and found answers that truly satisfied hearts that were seriously thirsty. Finally, one lady - in fact it was the lady under whose porch we were sheltering from the heat – she said, "It's magnificent!"

It truly is a magnificent experience whenever we hear God's voice speaking to our heart out of our reading of his Word, the Bible. In the days which followed, the unfolding of events clearly confirmed that a work of God's Holy Spirit really had taken place in the hearts of our host family, and days of rejoicing followed just like we read about in the New Testament.

Mother, father and daughter testified of their salvation. A week ago their lives had been so empty, they said. But in the last few days they'd received God's word, had heard him speaking to them in the scriptures we shared, and they were full of the joy of their salvation – even the knowledge that their sins were all forgiven.

But they were also aware that their past might catch up with them. As they talked with us about their very real desire to be baptized, they realized at the same time that some of their neighbours could speak against them and mention the drinking, smoking and partying they'd been known for before. Yet despite

what people might say, we urged them to go forward and follow the Lord's command to be baptized.

They did so, and I was delighted to return later and to have their close friends who were not in the church come up to me and quite spontaneously tell me that they'd seen a wonderful change in their lives.

You see, the only answer to our critics – imagined or otherwise – is to begin to live out a genuine relationship with Christ. We mentioned the Apostle Paul's violently anti-Christian past, and how that made his early days as a Christian difficult – and difficult for others to accept. But Paul models for us the best answer to give our critics when he says:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the

Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

When we live a life of faith, with a contagious enthusiasm, and a real desire to share our faith with others, then they will soon see we've been with Jesus, and plainly see that God is with us.

As the Apostle Peter encourages us:

Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:14-16)

That's the best way to live down our past, and go forward with God.

4. "I'm not up to the

When God called Moses at the burning bush to return to Egypt and deliver his people, Moses was ready with his excuses. He said first of all that he was a nobody; then he was afraid that he didn't know enough; and next he worried about what others would say (especially about his past).

God has graciously dealt with all these, but still Moses hesitates, and says:

... 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." (Exodus 4:10)

This reminds us of Jeremiah's similar reaction when God called him to be a prophet, saying:

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."
Then I said, "Alas, Lord GOD!
Behold, I do not know how to speak,
Because I am a youth."
But the LORD said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am a youth,'
Because everywhere I send you,
you shall go,*

*And all that I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
For I am with you to deliver you,"
declares the LORD.*

Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me,

"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:5-9)

Moses' reaction here is similar. "I'm no good at speaking," he says. A surprising confession, perhaps, when we recall that he's previously been described as powerful in his words and deeds, having benefited from an Egyptian education. What's happened since, we wonder? Well, he's just spent the past 40 years in the desert; it could be that's got something to do with it. But God gave Moses the same reassurance he gave to Jeremiah – and to us – *"I will teach you what you are to say"* (4:12).

But notice, God has already asked Moses a question (4:2) – "What is that in your hand?" Literally, the answer was Moses' shepherd's staff or rod and God showed him a sign to do with it in the land of Egypt. But perhaps, we can also think of a general principle here. When God asks what Moses has in his hand, is he not indicating that he has the power to use whatever it is that

Moses has?

And it's the same in our case: God will use what you have, not what you don't have. I remember this principle being taught in a counselling course to parents – the message being, focus on what you can do, not on what you can't.

Of course, even the abilities and gifts we have are God-given, as the apostle Paul reminded the Church at Corinth, asking them:

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7)

We need to remember that lesson. The gifts belong to the Giver himself. We employ them for him and for his glory. In fact, all we have, our physical and mental strength and energies, if sanctified for our Master's use, can be used by God in advancing his purpose through our lives.

So, don't look at the gifts God has given to others, and then reflect on what you don't have – I can guarantee you from the Bible that God has gifted you – and what he's given you he'll use in ministry for him. Take, for example, the words of the apostle Peter, when he says:

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the

strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10,11)

Each one – each believer on the Lord Jesus – has a gift from God to use in his service. We, too, can learn from what the apostle Paul said to Timothy in First Timothy chapter 4:

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. (1 Timothy 4:12-14 NAS)

Notice how Paul speaks to Timothy regarding the gift that was in him. He was to use what he already had – recognizing that he had received it from God.

'Show yourself an example', Paul says first of all. The word 'example' here literally means a 'striking impression'. Put that way it's quite challenging, isn't it? What impression are others struck with as they listen to our speech, as they regard our conduct and as they detect our faith, love and purity?

Next, Paul calls on Timothy to recognize the Bible's authority.

Notice the order when he says 'give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.' This referred to Timothy's public reading of Scripture, and it was to come first: before the encouraging and the teaching. As a matter of principle reading comes before exhortation and doctrine. Any preacher or teacher must first identify his authority as being from God through the Bible, the Word of God.

The third piece of advice Paul passes on to Timothy – and this is the one we're mainly interested in – the third piece of advice is about the need to develop Timothy's gift. He's told not to neglect the gift within him. That tells us quite a few things. It confirms what we've already seen from Peter: that we've each got a gift: a spiritual endowment from God which we may take as dating back to the time of our new birth. But surely, it also implies there's benefit in recognizing our personal gift or gifts. Perhaps you believe you can still serve God perfectly well without having identified your particular gift from God. To a fair extent that's true - you can use it unconsciously - and in small churches, of necessity, you can sometimes serve in a capacity for which you don't feel specially qualified and God can come in to help in a special way in these circumstances, but the fact remains that if Timothy was called upon not to neglect his gift - and if we're to do the same - we'll first have to recognize our own gift so that we can

be careful not to neglect it. Will we not maximize our potential effectiveness under God and perhaps minimize our stress levels when we serve according to the gift we've been given?

Timothy seems to have been guided in relation to his gift by a prophetic message. Since we now have the completed Bible, the equivalent process today would be expected to operate in connection with God's Word. So I think one helpful guide to discerning which gift we have from God is by noticing how the Word of God affects us in our daily reading – how the Bible impacts us. What leaps out from its pages and grips us? Is it a sermon structure or an illustration of the gospel or a message of encouragement to pass on? Or is our heart moved by examples of compassion and helpfulness in caring for others? These can give an indication to a maturing Christian as to the direction in which his or her gift lies.

Also, just as the church elders came to Timothy and had fellowship with him in this matter of affirming his gift, we can learn the value of being guided by mature counsel as to the use of our gift.

So far Paul's passed on key advice about setting a personal example, and about being up-front as to our Bible basis in all that we teach, as well as encouragement to use our gift for the Lord.

As we return in closing to Moses, let's

not make the same excuse he did. If God asks us to speak up for him or do something for him, let's think again of Peter's words:

Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:11)

... and let's in faith do what God asks of us.

When Moses said, "I'm not up to the job," God had really already

answered this by demonstrating to him that he had the power to use whatever he had. Just as he could use Moses' staff – he could also use Moses' speaking ability whenever it was sanctified to God's use. So please don't neglect what you have, what God has given you, your gift from God – God has given it to you because he wants to use it through you in his service. The power and the glory will rightly belong to the Giver – God; but the Lord graciously waits to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

May that be for our encouragement in doing the job God gives us.

5. "You've got the wrong person"

I've got a question for you. "When is a computer expert not a computer expert?" Answer: when he's a taxi driver. If that seems a bit weird, read on and I'll explain.

For a strange thing happened on the BBC's 24-hour news channel fairly recently. It involved totally the wrong person being interviewed. The man who should have been interviewed was a computer expert, and he could only watch in astonishment when he saw the interview go out live - an interview with someone else who was supposedly him!

A white, bearded technology expert - was astonished to see himself appear on screen as a black man with an apparent French accent and unable to answer basic questions about a legal battle over the use of an apple symbol.

The whole thing descended into farce as the wrong person gamely attempted to answer questions fired at him by BBC consumer affairs correspondent. Somehow he'd found himself being ushered into a studio and fitted with a microphone. Before he knew it, he was in the hot seat being interviewed live on air.

The man who should have been interviewed said that the other man

"seemed as baffled as I felt" when asked about the consequences of the lawsuit live on BBC News 24.

It was only when the BBC's consumer affairs correspondent announced live on air the name and title of the man who should have been there and asked the first question did the taxi driver realise that there had been a mix-up.

A BBC spokeswoman said: "Unfortunately we did make a mistake and the wrong person was interviewed briefly on air before we cut to our reporter."

Mistakes do happen, of course, but we mention this by way of introduction because the fifth and final excuse that Moses offered to God was, in effect: "God, I'm sorry. You've got the wrong person!"

This was when verse 13 in chapter 4 records Moses as saying:

"Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will." (Exodus 4:13)

When we read on and see what follows and how God answers Moses, it's almost as if we could summarize Moses' sentiment here as: "Here am I, send Aaron"!

Before we comment further on that, I think we should hear the Lord's answer in full - and the conclusion of the whole matter. We pick up the story after Moses has just told God that he's not a good communicator:

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."

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. 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; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go ...

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 about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped. (Exodus 4:14-31)

Well, what has this to do with us? Just this: do we not sometimes try to slide out of our responsibilities in serving the Lord - preferring the Lord to use someone else perhaps - someone we think of as being better equipped to handle the task than we are?

For example, we hear the words of the Lord Jesus in the Book of Acts, chapter one - when right at the beginning of that book he addressed the apostles and said: "You shall be My witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Although that was something extra special for them - they were the eye-witnesses of his resurrection - still, the

implications of this command come down the centuries to all followers of Christ. Each of us has a personal responsibility to witness for our Lord in whatever circumstances he's placed us.

"You shall be My witnesses" – each word in that five word sentence is full of significance. It begins 'you': the Lord is now pointing to each one of us, not to the person next to us. Then he says 'shall' – notice it's not 'may be', but 'shall be'. The Lord expects – he's counting on us – to obey his command. He's no other plan to reach the world with the Christian message, other than this plan in which you and I play our part. Then he says 'be': you'll be My witnesses. It's not so much about what we do; more about being different and showing the world that we are new creatures in Christ. Before we even speak, our lives should testify for him. So witnessing is not so much one extra activity box we've got to tick, but rather it's a whole lifestyle thing. Then, of course, he says 'My' – 'My witnesses': we're to be his witnesses. What an honour! Witnesses of the risen Lord. We're to evidence our personal relationship with the King of kings! Finally, the last word is 'witnesses'. Behind this word is the word from which we get our English language word 'martyr' – reminding us that many of the early Christians actually lost their lives because of their courageous witness for their Master. For us, it'll at least mean laying down

our own agendas and ambitions, and putting Christ and his claims first in our lives.

That's some responsibility, I'm sure you'll agree. But we can't slide out of it. The Lord here is not talking about the gift of evangelism when he says, "You shall be My witnesses." Some of us will be more gifted for evangelism than others, but witnessing is a matter of responsibility, not gift. The Lord expects it of each of us. We can't try it on like Moses: "Here am I, send my brother"!

But, of course, the Lord meets our need for support in this witnessing activity. For after saying this in the first chapter of Acts, when we turn the page into the second chapter of Acts, we begin to read of the first 'witness centre' at Jerusalem. The first witnesses, in other words the first Christians – were together in the Church of God at Jerusalem - and the setting is 52 days after the cross of Christ.

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe ... And all those who had believed were together ... Day by day continuing with one mind ... together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the

Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:41-47)

There's a wonderful sense of togetherness there, I'm sure you'll agree. The Lord Jesus Christ has planned in his Word that there should be a biblical context for our witnessing. We're not to be 'lone rangers'; but together with other

witnessing Christians as part of the authentic community for which the Lord gives us the blueprint throughout the New Testament – and everywhere we look, it's consistent with what we find here in Acts chapter 2.

In serving the Lord, there's no excuse for us not doing his will in the way he intends.

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