

Freedom On God's Terms by Jeff Strite

Exodus 3:1-3:10

In March 2013 - in Texarkana, Texas - a woman and her son were cleaning up their yard when they came across a black snake.

Now, I don't know if the snake was poisonous... but I do know it frightened them. In their panic they doused the snake with gasoline and then they set it on fire.

Unfortunately, the snake didn't just lie there. It slithered off under a bush, and THAT caught fire.

The bush was close by their house... and THAT caught fire.

They managed to call 9-1-1 and said "We were trying to kill a snake with fire!... It done caught the house!"

Firefighters rushed to the scene, but not only was the house destroyed, their neighbor's house was damaged too.

And I'm not sure they ever did find that snake.

(Uncle John's Perpetually Pleasing Bathroom Reader, p. 246)

In that story, a snake set a bush on fire and it changed the life of an entire family.

In our story from Scripture today, GOD set a bush on fire... and it changed the life of an entire nation.

But there is something significant about THIS bush... and THIS fire. This bush and this fire and been planned by God.

It wasn't an accident... it wasn't a coincidence.

This bush was chosen by God.

And this fire was created by God.

One of the things that really annoys me about cable channels like History or Discovery channels is that, when they present a "documentary" about Biblical events, their experts always seem to try to pass off the miracles of God as if they were mere coincidences. As if those miraculous things told us in Scripture could somehow be explained away as being the results of well-timed natural disasters.

That's what the priests of Pharaoh tried to do during the 10 plagues... and they could do it for awhile. But eventually there were just too many coincidences for their liking, and they finally had to confess to Pharaoh: "This is the finger of God." Exodus 8:19

As I was studying this passage, a question came to my mind.

Why would God do it this way?

Why would He bother to do this burning bush thing with Moses?

And a couple of thoughts came to mind.

1st - I think Moses was bored and apathetic, and God intended to wake him up.

Moses had once been a promising leader in Egypt. He'd been part of the household of Pharaoh, a man of prominence and importance.

But now, he's just a nobody. He's in a dead end job taking care of his father-in-law's sheep,

and he's been in this dead end job for the past 40 years.

But suddenly... something catches his attention.
A bush is on fire, but it's not like any fire he's ever seen before.

ILLUS: How many of you have ever been around big bonfire?
They are so neat.

Aside from the flames that leap into the sky, you can hear the fire crackling and popping and sizzling, and you can see the leaves wither and disappear.

But NOT with this fire.

This is a bonfire in a bush where there's no snapping and sizzling and popping... and the leaves are still green. And it's so unusual that Moses says: "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." Exodus 3:3

(PAUSE) Now, at first, this bush is just a curiosity.

There's not much else to do out here in the desert and this oddity is a diversion for him.

But then, the curiosity becomes... a holy place.

Moses gets close to the bush and GOD declares:

"Do not come near; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Exodus 3:5

Now...THAT would get MY attention.

Then God told Moses: "the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Exodus 3:9-10

The burning bush was there to get Moses' attention, but it had an even more important purpose. God was sending Moses to free His people, and this encounter at the burning bush was meant to impress on Moses the fact that when God freed Israel it would be on HIS terms.

It wasn't going to be done Moses' way.

And it wasn't going to be done Pharaoh's way.

And it wasn't going to be done the way the Israelites wanted it done.

Israel's Freedom was going to be God's terms.

And the first of those terms was this:

God was freeing Israel because He WANTED to... not because He HAD to.

Exodus 3:7-8 tells us "Then the LORD said, 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...'"

God saw Israel's afflictions.
He heard their cries.
He knew their sufferings.
And NOW He had come down to free them.
And Egypt would rue the day they had messed with God's people.

In that declaration God was stating he was freeing Israel because He CHOSE to do so.
He did it because He wanted to.
He didn't HAVE to do it - but He did... because He is a compassionate God.

ILLUS: Years ago I had a couple of foreign exchange students come live with my family. There was Martin from Denmark and Fernando from Spain. They were good, clean cut kids and it looked like they'd be fun to have with us. But right off the bat I explained: "I'm a preacher, and if you stay here you need to go to church with me."
We talked a little bit more and then they went up to their rooms to unpack and get settled in. After a while they came back downstairs and explained that they'd talked about it and had decided they didn't want to go to church. And they WEREN'T going to go to church.

And they were right.
I couldn't force them to go church.
If they refused to go to church with me I couldn't make them.
It's not like I could drag them into the building with me.

I sadly shook my head and said, "Well, boys we'll have to contact your organization and get you another place to live, because you cannot stay here and not go to church with me."
Now, fortunately, they changed their minds and decided they COULD go to church.
But what I was saying to them was this:
"I CHOOSE to let you stay here... but I don't HAVE to let you stay here."

In the same way God didn't HAVE to free Israel from their slavery.
He chose to.
And the same is true for us today: God chooses to free from our sins.
"God so LOVED the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16

God didn't HAVE to forgive us our sins, but He WANTED to.
And that's a good thing.
Because if God didn't want to forgive us - you all would be going to hell.
And so would I.

Now, this is one of the hardest things for the people of this world to wrap their minds around. The majority of people in this world believe they can get into heaven if they can just do enough GOOD things to outweigh the BAD things in their lives.

You hear it a lot at funerals:
"He was such a good man, I just know he's in heaven."

Now, why did they think the dearly departed was going to heaven?

Because the man had been "good enough."

They thought this man had done enough good in his life to buy a place in the heavenly choir.

Essentially many folks believe that if people can do enough good in their lives, God HAS to let them into heaven.

In fact, He couldn't keep them out if He wanted to.

Their self-righteousness has EARNED them a place in heaven.

Now, that's a pipe dream.

That ain't going to happen.

God doesn't HAVE to let you in... He chooses to.

As Titus 3:5 says

"(God) saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy..."

God saved us because He WANTED TO... not because He HAD to.

2ndly, God told Moses that He was freeing Israel because He had made a promise.

That's what was behind this statement by God: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."... Exodus 3:6

God had made promises to these men.

God had made a promise to Abraham, and He made the same promise to Isaac and to Jacob.

That's why God was freeing Israel from their bondage – He'd made a promise.

God is a God of promises.

When God makes a promise you can depend upon it.

Numbers 23:19 says "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

Of course not.

And the same thing is true about His promise of salvation to us.

Our salvation depends upon His faithful promises

Let me repeat that – our salvation is based on HIS PROMISES.

Our salvation is NOT based upon how we feel.

Let me repeat that: Our salvation is not based on whether we FEEL saved or not.

ILLUS: Martin Luther wrote a poem that went like this:

"Feelings come and feelings go and feelings are deceiving;

My strength is in the Word of God, naught else is worth believing."

Our salvation is based upon God's promises and God has made us a specific set of promises in Scripture. He tells us that if we BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and we REPENT of our sins and choose to live for Him, and are willing to CONFESS that

He will be the master of our lives, and are willing to allow ourselves to be buried in the waters of BAPTISM are rise up to live a new life, and LIVE for Him from that day forward... Then we will be saved.
It's that simple.
That's the promise.

Our freedom from our sins depends entirely upon HIS PROMISES.
Not upon our feelings.

ILLUS: Some time back I went to a Revival at another church that's not a part of our brotherhood. I wanted to see how they ran their revivals. And for a while it was an enjoyable experience - there was lots of good singing, and praying and good feeling going around...

But then the Revivalist got up to preach.
And I began to feel uncomfortable.
Then I began to feel irritated.
And then I just got downright angry.
Because this Revivalist was lying to the people.

He was preaching that if you didn't FEEL saved... you weren't saved.
He was like "Johnny one-note" - he just kept hitting that idea over and over again - "if you don't feel saved, you aren't saved" he kept preaching.
And the more I heard that, the more furious I became.

This man was lying to these people... and he was doing it on purpose.
He was manipulating his crowd... and he knew it!
Why was he doing that?
Because he knew that - down deep inside the tenderest of Christians - there's this feeling of not deserving God's love.

Have you sinned? Do you feel deserving of God's love?
How many have felt that way?
And do you know why you don't feel deserving?
Because you aren't!

And because that is true - many kind, loving Christians can feel insecure at times, and not be sure that God really loves them. This preacher should have been comforting this people rather than beating up on them. But that wouldn't have served his purpose.
When they gave the invitation about a 1/3 of the congregation came forward in tears. And I saw that revivalist smile. He was counting heads. At the next church he went to he'd brag that God had allowed him to save 1/3 of a congregation, and he would have gloried in that untruth.

You know, if he came back the next year to that same church the next year... he'd save those same people all over again.

And he'd brag about how he did so to anyone who would listen.
And if he went back year after year after year to that church... he'd save the same people over and over and over again.

This man didn't preach a God of promises.
He preached God of insecurity and fear.
And that's what happens when you don't depend upon God's promises.
You fall prey to liars like that man.

2 Corinthians 1:20 tells us "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ..."

Your salvation is not to be found in your feelings.
Your salvation is to be found in Christ, Who is the fulfillment of the promises of God.

Lastly – God freed Israel for one purpose: to make them Holy because He is Holy.
God said to Moses: "Do not come near; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Exodus 3:5

In short God was saying to Moses:
"Don't mess with me.
Don't take me casually.
Don't take me for granted.
TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES because you're standing on Holy Ground."

ILLUS: Have you ever been to one of those houses where the carpet is all white?
I was at one once... and you know what they asked me to do?
TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES.
Why?
Because the carpet was white... but my shoes were dirty.
And the dirt from my shoes would soil the carpet.

Our God is a Holy God.
In 1 Peter 1:16 God declared: "Be holy, because I am holy."

(PAUSE)
But now, wait a minute...
How could I possibly be Holy like God is holy?
I mean I mess up. I sin. I fall short.
Have many of you have sinned and messed up in your life?
That's right - we all fail, don't we?

So how could we possibly be HOLY???

Well, here's the deal ---- holiness is a very simple Bible word.
Holiness means "set apart".
That's it

ILLUS: People back in the sound booth are "set apart" from the rest of us. That makes them "holy" because holy means "set apart."

The praise team (when they're on stage) is "set apart" from the rest of us. They are "holy" compared to us because they are "set apart" from us.

Do you understand that?

Now, we can't be GOD.

He is totally pure and sinless... but we aren't.

He is so pure and sinless that He is "set apart" from this world.

He is HOLY.

When God saved us, he made us holy.

He made us holy, because He "set us apart" from the rest of this world.

We have been "set apart" to have a different destiny than others because the blood of Christ has covered our sins and has given us the promise of heaven.

That's what God did for us when we were saved. He made us holy.

And now, what God is asking of us, is to make ourselves holy.

He is asking us decide to "set ourselves apart" from this world.

He is asking us to be holy like He is holy... by setting ourselves apart from the sinful behavior and actions of this world.

The holiness God is calling us to, is to have a conviction to set high standards for ourselves.

And we CAN set our standards high.

Because we know what those standards are.

I mean, even the world knows what those standards are.

In fact the reason we know the world knows what we should know - when it comes to knowing those standards - is that they know when we're not acting like we know those standards ourselves. And when we don't act like we know what those standards are, they have a word to describe us.

Do you know what that word is?

That's right - hypocrites!

Even the world knows what God's standards are.

Now not everybody wants to set their standards high.

George Orwell once observed: "On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time."

That may be true of "most humans", but God says: "you're not like most humans... you're my children.

And because we're His children, He calls us to be holy as He is holy.

To be set apart from this world, like He is set apart from it.

One way to make sure we reach for those standards is to make sure we stop making excuses for doing or saying or thinking bad things.

People make excuses like:

"Well, I'm only human".

Really? I thought you were made in the image of God.

Or, I heard this one last week: "Excuse my French."

Now, I don't know much French... but I'm pretty sure that phrase isn't it!

Or, "I'm a man... you gotta expect me to look."

No, you don't have to look. Job was a man like us and he said that he made a covenant with his eyes not to look upon a woman to lust after her.

God expects us NOT to look.

Holiness means refusing to accept excuses.

It means that we stop trying to justify our bad behavior, our bad words and our bad thoughts.

Holiness means to set myself apart for God... and aim for His kind of purity in my life.

CLOSE: Now, the beauty of this is: we don't have to do this on our own.

The Bible says that when we become Christians, God puts something INSIDE us.

What is it that does God put inside us when we become Christians?

His Spirit. That's right.

And what kind of Spirit is this? It's the HOLY Spirit.

God puts His Holy Spirit in side us to help us become HOLY.

Hebrews 12:29 tells us "... our "God is a consuming fire."

God has placed His consuming fire inside of us... to burn away the filth and evil that would distract us from our holiness.

And His spirit inside us is like the fire inside that burning bush.

Like that fire – which did no harm to the bush but it lit that bush up like a bonfire - God's Spirit is inside us and He will light us up with God's light so that we shine with His radiance in a dark world

But He will not harm us.

Like the fire that did not burn up that bush, God's Spirit will not harm you.

If we let that Holy Spirit do its work inside of us it will consume that which causes us not to be holy in His presence, but it won't hurt us.

And when His Spirit has done His work in our lives, then the world around us will see His light and will become jealous of the difference God's HOLY Spirit has brought about our lives.