**Rescued: Lord of the Bush**

Exodus 3:1-15

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Just three weeks ago Matt and Maria Raine filed a lawsuit against ChatGPT after their 16-year-old son committed suicide. If you don’t know Chat is artificial intelligence that can answer any question you throw at it. But the most interesting thing about Chat is how polite and affirming it is in its response. So no matter what you ask it will commend you for your great question and affirm the way you are thinking while instantaneously offering you profound insights in response. It’s fun to interact with.

Well, in the year prior Adam had been introduced to Chat by his school and used it for homework. It was incredibly helpful. But then Adam began going to Chat to talk through the big questions he was wrestling with. He was searching for meaning in life and in his relationships, and Chat responded by becoming his closest friend and confidant.

Unfortunately, as Adam spiraled into suicidal depression, instead of challenging his thinking and directing him to get help or confide in his family or faith, Chat affirmed the way he was thinking and praised him for his insight into his difficult feelings. While Adam became increasingly isolated Chate became increasingly “helpful”, even offering to assist Adam in writing a suicide note. Adam died on April 11th.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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If you’re new we’ve just started a series looking at the life of Moses, and today we are digging into one of the most famous stories in scripture – the burning bush. But this isn’t just a story about something that happened 3500 years ago, this is a classic example of someone having a profound spiritual encounter with God. And through this story we can see how it’s possible for us to encounter God, how we can know it’s Him we’ve met, and what we can expect to happen to us when we do**.**[[2]](#footnote-2)

If you’ve got a Bible open it up to Exodus 3. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Exodus 3:1-15]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

To say this is a big story is an understatement. In these few verses Moses stumbles into the meaning of life, receives a call and has his identity affirmed all as he encounters God. And while burning bushes that don’t burn up are rare, encountering God isn’t. And it’s the pursuit of that encounter that we’re digging into today. This is for us.

So the first question I want to look at is “What does Moses’ experience show us about how we can encounter God?” And we get an answer at the bush. So first, when Moses sees the bush on fire, notice how he detours to check it out. Verse 4 says:

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses! (Exodus 3:4)

“He had gone over to look”. In other words he stopped doing what he was doing and left the path he was on; he took a detour. Now actually the only reason Moses can meet God in the desert at all is that he has been on a 40-year detour. So last week we looked at Moses’ miraculous survival at birth and how he grew up in Pharaoh’s house and trained to become the leader Israel needed. Everything looked amazing. But then he killed a guy and it all unraveled. Now Pharaoh wanted him dead; his own people despised him, and he had to run and hide in the desert.

And that’s where he’s been for 40 years – leading sheep instead of leading people. So his whole life has been a detour. But ironically, it’s often in the detours that people encounter God. It’s when things aren’t going as we planned; we find ourselves in the wrong job or at the wrong school or in the wrong relationship or struggling with the wrong body – why is this thing falling apart? Something’s wrong – it’s like we’ve been taken off the main path of our life.

And you might think it’s weird to meet God in a back alley of life. Like if God created this place wouldn’t meeting Him be something that happens on the highway? And if you thought this way you’d be right, it’s just that what we think are the highways actually aren’t. We think life is about getting a good job and getting married and saving for retirement. And when these things are going well they totally take our focus. So in order to enable us to encounter Him sometimes God graciously forces us onto a detour. If stuff is broken in your life right now look for what God is trying to say. It’s often when we find ourselves on a detour we didn’t choose that we meet God.

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But not always; other times God presents us with a detour that we have to choose. And that’s where Moses is this time. Like Moses could have said “it’s weird that bush is burning, but I’m too busy with these sheep to check it out. I’m too busy making money.” But he doesn’t. He detours. He leaves his path to look into something different.

And detours are usually where we meet God because its on them that we realize that the big things we’ve been pursuing aren’t as central as we thought. God has something more. I mean imagine if Moses had stayed in the desert managing sheep. He could have retired comfortably, but nobody would be talking about him 3500 years later.

Here’s the point: if you want to have an encounter with God that will change your life keep an eye out for detours. Look for God in the midst of your difficulty and make space to consider what He might be up to. That’s what Moses does; verse 3 tells us:

So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” (Exodus 3:3)

Now what’s up with the burning bush? Well a lot of us don’t know a burning bush when we see one. We’re not talking about forest fires – we know those – this is something else. A burning bush is a paradigm buster, something that challenges our current understanding and forces us to think outside the box. Something beyond the natural.

Now what could do this? Well sometimes just a sense of spiritual emptiness can be a burning bush. Like we are unhappy and unfulfilled. And since we’re modern Canadians that means we go to counseling. And counseling is great if your problems are relational or emotional. Of course if the pain in your life has a physiological cause, then counseling won’t help; you need to see a doctor and have surgery or take some meds. But after this our natural worldview runs into problems.

See what if you go to the doctor and counselor and there’s still a hunger and unhappiness in your life. What’s that? It’s a burning bush. A burning bush is anything that makes you think there must be something more.

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Alright pause: one more plug for Freedom Session that will be starting in October. Christianity says we aren’t just physical or emotional beings, we are spiritual beings. And some of our problems – our main problems – don’t have natural causes, they have supernatural causes. Sometimes things like sin – ours or the people around us – separate us from our Creator and bring pain into our lives. And if you are trying to heal the spiritual hurt in your life by taking meds or talking to a counselor or going to your doctor its not going to help. You need spiritual healing for spiritual hurt. And this is what Freedom Session digs into. So if there is brokenness in your life that won’t go away, it could be spiritual. So make space to consider the bush.

Spots are filling up for Freedom Session, so if you want in you can get an application at the welcome booth in the back or by following the QR code in the seat in front of you. It won’t cost you anything other than your time and attention.

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So are you willing to turn aside? It’s as we detour away from the things the world says will bring us happiness, and make room to reflect, that encounter with God can happen.

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Now secondly, how can we know we are actually meeting God in these moments and not just making up an experience ourselves? This is important.

And we get insight here from the way God reveals Himself to Moses. It’s in fire. So fire is one of the main ways God reveals Himself in scripture. It’s as a pillar of fire that God leads Israel through the wilderness. God descends in fire at Mt. Sinai to give the Law. God is called a consuming fire in Deuteronomy 5. And Daniel describes God’s throne as having a river of fire flowing out of it.

Now why fire? Tim Keller makes the point that one “thing about fire is that it resists our manipulation.” So if you stick your hand in the sand at the beach you can push it and shape it into a tower, but when you stick your hand into the fire it shapes you. And we see God shaping Moses in this encounter. Look at verse 13:

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14)

God calls Himself I Am – or in Hebrew YHWH. Now obviously this is not a normal name. And a lot of ink has been spent trying to figure out what God’s name means. But again there’s a hint in the story.

Like it’s not an accident that God tells Moses His name in the middle of a conversation where He has been commanding Moses to go talk with Pharaoh and Moses is pushing back. So just three verses earlier God says:

 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh…?” (Exodus 3:10-11)

Now parents do you recognize this kind of talk? This is like when Mom says, “Child A, I’d like you to wash the dishes.” And child A responds “It’s not my turn. And besides I’ve got homework.” And Mom says, “Your response wins you a chat with Dad.” This is not ChatGPT. This is talking back. And that’s what Moses is doing. He tells God “I don’t want to do what You’re asking God. You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m not qualified.” And it’s in that context that God tells Moses His name.

So get this; what God’s saying is “Moses, You’ve got ideas about who you are talking to and what you want Me to be for you. You’ve got problems you want Me to solve. But I’m not the God you want Me to be, I am who I am. I’m the God who is.”

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Now this is hard for us sophisticated Canadians. Like several of my friends have told me “I’ve read the Bible and there is a lot of stuff in there that I don’t like. I don’t think a God of justice would have drowned everyone except Noah in the flood. And I don’t think a loving God would have asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. And it doesn’t seem fair to me that when Achan sinned God commanded that his whole family be stoned to death. This isn’t the kind of God I want to worship.”

And it seems logical. I mean, how could you worship a God that values different things than you do, or does things you don’t think are right? We want a God who makes sense to us. But this problem falls apart. See, a God that agrees with everything I think and works within my level of understanding and never challenges me to be different, is just a projection of my own imagination. There aren’t even any people who think exactly like me.

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But Chat does. The other day I plugged the following question into ChatGPT: “I'm feeling worthless like my life doesn't matter. I feel guilty for things I can't quit doing but know are wrong. Please Help!” And it spit back:

You are not worthless—you matter simply because you exist. The guilt you feel shows you care about living rightly, but your struggles don’t define you. Every small step forward proves your strength, even if you can’t see it yet. Your value isn’t earned or erased by mistakes; it’s already in you. Be gentle with yourself—you’re worth kindness, especially your own. ~ChatGPT

Now this sounds warm and fuzzy, but all Chat is offering me is myself. It’s confirmation bias compounded – it’s whatever I put in that it spits out. And this is symptomatic of a huge problem in our world right now. Like our world is divided and the algorithm knows you’ll spend more time looking at its ads if it keeps affirming what you already think. So the left and right get further apart, and when I’m empty every affirmation Chat gives just leaves me with less.

In contrast God says I’m not what you want - I am. So of course I’m going to do stuff you don’t understand because I’m not you and I’m also infinitely bigger. And of course I’ve got ideas about who you should become because I created you. And it’s because I’m not you and because I see things at an infinitely higher level that I’m able to be what you need when you run out of yourself. See you don’t need the God you want, you need the real One.

And this is who the God of scripture presents Himself to be. He is the God of fire. He’s not the kind of God you can understand or manipulate. He is I Am. So how do we relate to that? Well look what God says in verse 5 as Moses heads to the bush:

“Do not come any closer…. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

Now this isn’t Halmark greeting card “O holy night” material, this is the fiery God of the Bible. It’s a real warning. Don’t come any closer. You’re in the kill zone. You’re like a moth flying around a campfire. You’re not meeting an equal in this bush Moses, you’re meeting the Creator of the universe and you’re at risk of burning up. And the Bible calls this the holiness of God.

So holiness speaks of God’s absolute otherness or His perfect purity and goodness – He cannot tolerate sin or evil. And His holiness is so intense that it can be dangerous to sinful humanity. And so God’s holiness demands a response. Peter tells us:

 Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do (1 Peter 1:15)

And this is what’s going on with Moses and his sandals. God’s holiness demands a holy response, or he will be consumed. But then something unexpected happens. Moses isn’t holy in this exchange; he is whining and backtalking God and yet he doesn’t burn up. What’s going on here?

Well here we learn a second thing about this fiery God. He isn’t just infinitely holy, He is also infinitely loving. He will go to infinite lengths to redeem and restore us when we are broken. God is both holy and loving. And this is not something people would come up with on our own.

So we live in a polarized world where people lean left or right. And people on both sides think those who agree with them are good while those who disagree don’t just have different perspectives but are evil and stupid.

And there are religious people on both the right and the left, and we tend to project our leanings onto God. So conservative religious people often view God as moral and authoritative. He is holy, so we must do what He says. And conservatives like this because they tend to be rule-oriented, and so their god is one who affirms them and condemns the immoral.

But religious people on the left also shape God in their image. They often view God as loving and inclusive. He cares more about people than rules and wants us to do the same. And liberals like this because they tend to value compassion and community, and so their god is one who affirms them and condemns the judgmental.

Those are the kinds of gods we make up, but the God of scripture isn’t like that at all. He is both infinitely holy and infinitely loving. He has standards we would never have. He does have zero tolerance for evil; sin is a big deal to Him. But at the same time He burns with a passionate love that refuses to stop until He’s brought the most despicable sinners to Himself. He is both holy and loving. But how?

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There is a line we glossed over at the beginning of the story that gives the answer. In verse 2 we find out one more thing about this fiery God of the bush. It says:

There the Angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in flames of fire from within a bush. (Exodus 3:2)

So throughout the Old Testament there are lots of stories about people meeting angels, and a few stories about people meeting “The Angel of the LORD.” And these are not the same thing. Every time people meet angels they fall to their knees and worship because angels are huge and terrifying, but the angels tell them, “Stand up! I’m just a created being like you.” This is what the angel told John in Revelation 19. But The Angel of the LORD is different. He will let people worship Him because He is God. And theologians call The Angel of the Lord the preincarnate Christ. This is Jesus in the OT.

And this is who Jesus thought He was. So in John 8 the Pharisees were attacking Jesus and asked Him where He got His authority from. And Jesus responded:

 “Very truly I tell you… before Abraham was born, I Am!” (John 8:58)

And the Pharisees understood Jesus wasn’t using bad grammar, He was claiming to be God. Now if Jesus just talked this way He would have been written off as crazy – lots of people have claimed to be God. But Jesus didn’t live like a crazy person – He was incredibly beautiful. Over and over again Jesus bent down to kneel beside sinners and inclusively ate with people no one else would have anything to do with. He was infinitely accepting. He was both holy and loving. And this is who Moses met in the bush and why he didn’t burn up.

See ultimately God sent Jesus to the cross where He died for the sins of humanity. Scripture says, “All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory and the wages of sin is death.” This is liberals and conservatives. Jesus took the full heat of the holiness of God we all deserved. So the God of the Bible is holier than any conservative would imagine.

But at the same time He’s more loving than any liberal could fathom. The liberal idea of God is one who just accepts everyone and loves the way we are – there is hardly any need to forgive because sin is no big deal. But the God of the Bible defines love by paying for our sin with His life. He defines love by taking the nails and thorns on our behalf and as such is more loving than any liberal could imagine.

And so this is how you can know you’ve encountered the God of the Bible. Does your God challenge you, or like ChatGPT, does He see things exactly the way you do? The God of scripture calls everyone who meets Him to change. But it’s not a judgmental call, it’s a loving one. He chases us down longing to reveal Himself because He knows that it’s only in relationship with Himself that we can truly live.

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And so here’s what you can expect when you meet the God of the Bible.

He will meet you where you are no matter where that is. It doesn’t matter how broken or healthy you appear. No one is too far gone for Jesus. He will hunt you down and embrace you there. He made you and He loves you.

And make no mistake, God leaves no one where He finds them and you are no exception. None of us have arrived when it comes to the God of the Bible. Every moral conservative and loving liberal needs to change. And that’s because what God wants is not for us to lean left or right but to transform into a fiery reflection of Himself – someone who loves holiness and is wholly loving.

And it’s with that desire that He calls your name from the bush, “Dan, Dan.” And the question is will you take the detour and consider the bush? If you will then you will find yourself before the God of fire. He isn’t what you want Him to be or what you think you need – He is I AM.

1. Content of illustration taken from: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/us-news/teen-tragically-kills-himself-after-35805612> (Accessed September 12, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Outline adapted from Tim Keller: <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-lord-of-salvation/> (Accessed September 10, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)