

**MOSES**  
**AND THE**  
**BURNING**  
**BUSH**

**R.C. SPROUL**



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# CONTENTS

Introduction	<b>A Consuming Fire</b> . . . . .	1
Chapter One	<b>The Invisible Hand of God</b> . . . . .	9
Chapter Two	<b>The Burning Bush</b> . . . . .	19
Chapter Three	<b>The Glory of God</b> . . . . .	29
Chapter Four	<b>God Comes Near</b> . . . . .	37
Chapter Five	<b>Holy Ground</b> . . . . .	47
Chapter Six	<b>I AM: The Name of God</b> . . . . .	55
Chapter Seven	<b>I AM: The Being of God</b> . . . . .	65
Chapter Eight	<b>I AM: The Aseity of God</b> . . . . .	75
Chapter Nine	<b>A Divine Mission</b> . . . . .	83
Chapter Ten	<b>A Shadow of Christ</b> . . . . .	93
Notes	. . . . .	103
About the Author	. . . . .	105



Introduction

# A CONSUMING FIRE

THE BURNING BUSH HAS BEEN a significant symbol throughout the history of the church, and for good reason. In the account of Moses and the burning bush, we see God's self-revelation. God appeared to Moses and provided an all-important disclosure: His everlasting, covenant name, Yahweh. The burning bush, as a symbol, signifies an encounter with the transcendent God and His divine revelation.

The account of the burning bush is a story about the holiness of God. What happened at the burning bush was a *theophany*—a visible manifestation of the invisible God. Moses' attention was caught by something mysterious. He saw a bush that was burning but not consumed. As Moses



drew near to the bush, God spoke, telling him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). The ground was holy not because of the presence of Moses but rather because of the presence of God. It was holy ground because at that point, an intersection between heaven and earth occurred. God Himself appeared, through the manifestation of His presence in the bush.

One of the church’s biggest problems is that we don’t understand who God is. But in that one revelation—the theophany in which God appeared to Moses—the transcendent majesty of God was partially unveiled. What had been invisible became visible through the theophany. Part of our problem is that when something is out of sight, it’s out of mind. But from time to time throughout biblical history, God manifests Himself to human eyes. God manifested Himself at the burning bush, and it was earth-shattering.

We talk theologically about the transcendence of God and the immanence of God. On the one hand, God is not a part of the created order. He’s above and beyond. That’s what we mean by *transcendent*.

And yet He is not remote. Aristotle thought of God as a do-nothing king who reigns but doesn’t rule. His god

is uninvolved with the affairs of human beings. But God is not like that. He is *immanent*, meaning He is close by. He's immanent in that He manifests Himself in the created order. He's immanent through the presence of the Holy Spirit and ultimately by virtue of the incarnation of Christ.

Scripture describes God as an all-consuming fire, which refers to His transcendent majesty (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). But He entered into communion with His creatures in the garden of Eden. In that original fellowship, prior to the fall, Adam and Eve delighted when God walked in the cool of the evening. They couldn't wait to enjoy His presence. But after the fall, if there had been no grace from God, then there would have been only judgment, and we would be without hope.

The whole Bible is the story of God's stooping and condescending to His embarrassed, frightened, fugitive people who hide ourselves because we know that we are naked and are ashamed. And the first act of redemption in the Bible is that God stooped down and covered our first parents' shame (Gen. 3:21). He covered Adam and Eve's sin, fashioning for them tunics of animal skin.

The redemption motif from Genesis to Revelation is a covering. It's a covering because in our fallen condition we

are naked before God. We're unclothed, and we require a covering that is acceptable to Him. By nature, other creatures have their covering that was provided by God. Birds have feathers. Other animals have their hides. But we need artificial covers and clothing. That in itself bears witness to our universal need for a covering. Even in the Old Testament sacrificial system, the throne of God in the Holy of Holies was covered with blood, which represented covering the sin of the people. The New Testament speaks of exchanging our filthy rags for the righteousness of Christ. The imagery we get in the New Testament is that we are covered, we are clothed, with the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 4:7–8; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Another familiar story in the Old Testament is Isaiah's vision of the Lord. Like Moses, Isaiah experienced the transcendence and immanence of the Lord:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” (Isa. 6:1–7)

Whether this vision occurred in the earthly temple or in the heavenly temple, one of the pieces of sacred furniture was the altar of incense. The altar of incense symbolized the prayers of God’s people. And on the altar were coals, which God used to depict Isaiah’s unholiness. When Isaiah saw God lifted up in His majesty, he immediately became aware of the dreadful contrast between himself and God. He cried out, “I am a man of unclean lips!” He cried out because his eyes had seen the Lord of hosts.

Isaiah realized who he truly was as soon as he realized who God is. He realized he was unclean. But we all, Isaiah realized, are filthy as well. And so to purify Isaiah for his mission, God dispatched a seraph to bring a burning coal from the altar and place it on Isaiah's lips. It wasn't for punishment; it was for purging. It was to make the unclean clean.

Just like Moses at the burning bush, Isaiah must have been terrified by his experience. Augustine said self-consciousness carries with it an immediate awareness of one's finitude. As soon as we are aware of ourselves, we know that we are not God and we know that we are subject to God. John Calvin said that we don't really understand who we are until we understand who God is; we don't first understand God until we encounter ourselves.

Calvin goes on to say that in our fallen condition we tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We observe each other, and we judge ourselves according to earthly standards. We can always find someone who is more corrupt than we are, or at least who appears to be. But when we lift our gaze to heaven and consider who God is, then we are reduced to dread. We don't measure up to the standard He demands.

The Lord is holy, high and lifted up. He is a consuming

fire. And if not for His grace, we would be consumed. This is still true for us today: if not for the covering of Christ's righteousness, if not for the purging of our filthiness, we would be consumed. But God in His grace has condescended to make it possible for us to stand in His presence through Christ and live. What Moses experienced at the burning bush is what God's people experience today: a holy, transcendent, all-consuming God who comes down to dwell with His people. He knows us.



## Chapter One

# THE INVISIBLE HAND OF GOD

IN 1583, THE SYMBOL OF THE BURNING bush was first adapted for use as the official seal of the synods of the Reformed Church of France. Likely influenced by John Calvin's commentary on Acts 7:30—where he remarked that the church is in a constant state of subjection to the “fire of persecution,” but, as Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18, the church is sustained by the presence of God and kept “from being consumed into ashes.” Over the centuries that followed, the symbol or one like it was adopted by other branches and denominations of Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, including some that use it today.

That moment in biblical history when Moses encountered the presence of God in the burning bush is a



watershed episode, not only for the life of Moses, or even for the history of Israel, but for the history of the entire world. This book will consider the significance of that event, looking at Moses' life leading up to that encounter and focusing on the knowledge of God that is revealed in that particular incident.

The account of the burning bush begins with an ominous statement early in the book of Exodus, which introduces a notion of profound concern that sets the stage for all that will follow in the book: “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8). Anyone who is familiar with the history that unfolded in the book of Genesis will immediately feel the weight of this statement. Genesis ends with the children of Israel being invited to move from Canaan, where severe famine had hit, into Egypt, where Joseph was serving as the prime minister. The Israelites were given the land of Goshen as a settling place, and as the years passed, the population of this group grew exponentially to become a large portion of the population of Egypt. In earlier days, they enjoyed the favor of the pharaoh who had promoted Joseph to the level of prime minister. But a new pharaoh came to power who “did not know Joseph.”

That signals a radical shift in the relationship between

the Jewish immigrants and the host country of Egypt. This new king said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us” (Ex. 1:9). That’s probably hyperbole, but Pharaoh was very concerned about the growth of the Israelites in their midst. So he said, “Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land” (v. 10).

Pharaoh had to be careful. He didn’t want them to leave, because they were slave labor upon which the whole economy depended. At the same time, he didn’t want them to become so numerous and strong that, if Egypt were attacked by another nation, there could be an insurrection. He needed to keep the Hebrew people in Egypt but ensure that they remained weak. So Pharaoh instituted a cunning plan: “Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad” (vv. 11–12). The idea was that the heavier their burdens during their period of slavery, the less likely they would live to old age; the life expectancy, particularly of the Hebrew men, would be shortened.

But the exact opposite result came to pass, and the

account says that the Egyptians “were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service” (vv. 12–14). Pharaoh increased the burden.

What comes next bears enormous significance for the history of the world. But before we look at that, consider this question: Who was the most important person in the entire Old Testament? Some may say Adam. Some might suggest Eve, saying that she was the mother of us all. Others might nominate Abraham, the father of the faithful and the one whom God called into covenant with Himself. Some may suggest David, as the prefiguration of the King who would come in New Testament times in the person of Jesus. All of these are legitimate candidates.

I think the single most important person in the whole Old Testament is Moses, not only because he led the people out of bondage in the exodus but also because he was the mediator of the old covenant, just as Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant. He is the one through whom God delivered the law to Israel in the form of the Ten Commandments. Without Moses’ leadership, the Jewish slaves would not have been molded into a nation by God, and they would not have received the law delivered by Moses. Any study of jurisprudence in Western civilization reveals

the impact of the Decalogue upon Roman, British, and American law. Moses is a man of enormous significance. We can see from the book of Exodus the extraordinary providence by which God, in His sovereignty, gave the world Moses.

Pharaoh's fear had escalated to such a degree that he created a new program to protect against the growing strength of the Jews: destroying the male babies that would be born. An edict came from Pharaoh, not unlike Herod's demand in New Testament days for the slaughter of newborn Jewish boys in order to destroy the Christ child: "Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live'" (Ex. 1:15–16). This is not simply a government sanctioning abortion, as wicked as that is; it is a case where a government is commanding infanticide.

Then, in verse 17, we see that amazing biblical word: *but*. Something comes along that thwarts this decree of the most powerful ruler in the world. "But the midwives . . ."—who were surely intimidated by the power of Pharaoh—"But the midwives feared God." These were

God-fearing women who had more reverence for God and more fear of offending God than they had of offending Pharaoh. So, “the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.” Here is an act of civil disobedience that received the blessing of God. We are always to obey the civil magistrates, unless they command us to do something that God forbids, or forbid us from doing something that He commands. In this case, the midwives were commanded to kill these babies, which would violate the character of God and their own consciences—so they disobeyed Pharaoh; they “did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.”

Pharaoh got word of this, and he called the midwives in, questioning them: “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” (Ex. 1:18). How did the midwives respond? With a righteous lie.

There are such things as righteous lies. We understand the biblical ethic that there is a sanctity of truth, and we are to speak the truth whenever we possibly can. However, the principle is this: we are always to tell the truth to whom the truth is due. That is, we are always called to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in the case of justice. However, if the enemy crosses your

borders and wants to know where your company is bivouacked, you're not obligated to reveal that information. If a murderer comes to your house and wants to know where your child is and you know his intent is to kill him, you're not required by God to tell him, "He's hiding in the bedroom."

The midwives' action was a godly deceitfulness, and it received the full blessing of God. The midwives said to Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them" (Ex. 1:19). Therefore, we are told, "God dealt well with the midwives" (Ex. 1:20). He blessed these women for their brave disobedience and dissent from Pharaoh's edict. "And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live'" (Ex. 1:20–22).

Next we read, "Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months" (Ex. 2:1–2). You might be able to keep a six-week-old baby quiet, but by

the time they are three months old, their cries cannot be silenced. People would begin to notice that an infant was nearby. “When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank” (Ex. 2:3). Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “basket” is the same word that is used for Noah’s ark. She put him in a vessel, a little ark. She consigned her baby to the benevolence of God, to His sovereignty, and to His providence. She knew that she was no longer able to keep her baby safe. She trusted her God to save his life, protecting him from the wrath of Pharaoh. She didn’t set it adrift in the Nile; she put it in the reeds, where it could still remain hidden, and had the baby’s older sister watch to see if anyone would rescue the baby. In the providence of God, a woman came down to bathe at the river—and not just any woman; it was Pharaoh’s daughter.

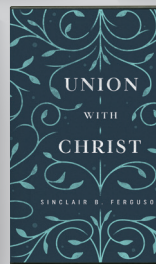
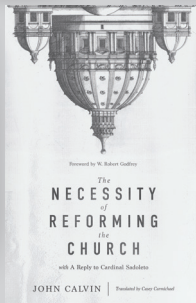
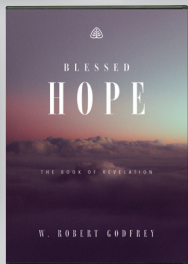
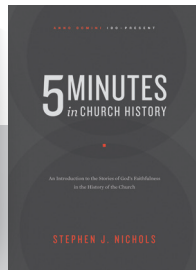
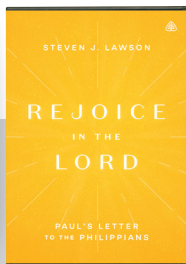
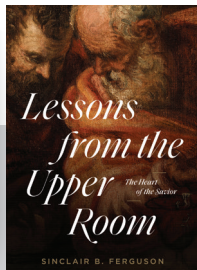
Imagine the terror in the heart of Moses’ sister when she saw the daughter of Pharaoh approaching that small ark in the reeds that hid her baby brother. “She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, ‘This is one of the Hebrews’ children’” (Ex. 2:5–6).

She didn't just say, "This has to be one of the Hebrew babies. I'll report it to my father and have the soldiers come and dispense with this child." No. She had compassion. Her natural instinct, when she found a crying baby, was to pick that baby up and try to comfort him. Moses' quick-thinking sister spoke up: "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Go.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages'" (Ex. 2:7-9).

"When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, 'Because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water'" (Ex. 2:10). This is how the life of Moses began. It was eighty years from that moment until Moses would meet the living God in the burning bush in the Midianite wilderness.



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of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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