

MOSES
AND THE
BURNING
BUSH

R.C. SPROUL



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Moses and the Burning Bush

© 2018 by R.C. Sproul

Published by Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org

Printed in China

RR Donnelley

0000324

First edition, first paperback printing

ISBN 978-1-64289-614-5 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56769-863-3 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-56769-916-6 (ePub)

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Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Reformation Trust edition as follows:

Names: Sproul, R. C. (Robert Charles), 1939-2017 author.

Title: Moses and the burning bush / R.C. Sproul.

Description: Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036641 (print) | LCCN 2017043110 (ebook) | ISBN 9781567699166 (ePub) | ISBN 9781567699173 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781567698633 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Moses (Biblical leader)

Classification: LCC BS580.M6 (ebook) | LCC BS580.M6 S67 2018 (print) | DDC 222/.1206--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017036641>

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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.”

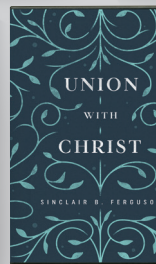
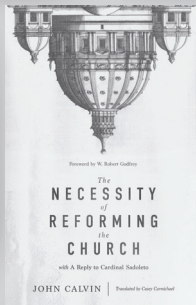
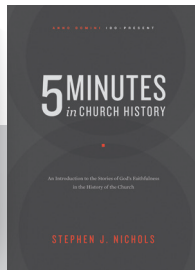
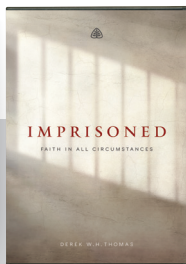
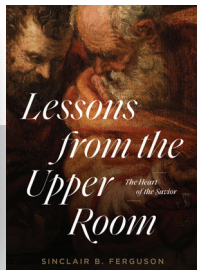
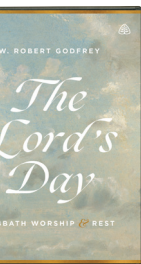
That signals a radical shift in the relationship between

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

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