



## Silverdale Baptist

MISSIONS 2023 ~ WHAT'S IN YOUR HAND? ~ EXODUS 4 ~ 03/18-19/2023

### Main Idea

We are called to participate in missions.

### Getting Started

#### **What sort of things do we ask God to do?**

Have you ever wondered if we are looking at things backward? Maybe instead of asking God to do something for us, we should spend more time asking God what He would have us do.

### Learn

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 4:1-20.

#### **Summarize the story in this passage.**

#### **Specifically, what was God's question in verse 2?**

### 1. What does the staff represent?

#### **In general, what would be the purpose of a shepherd's staff?**

- It provided stability
- It provided security

- It provided significance

**Most likely, none of us are shepherds today, so what would represent a staff in our lives?**

**What is your stability? Your security? Where do you find significance?**

## 2. How is the staff transformed?

- Release it to God
- Reorient it for God

**How was the staff transformed from an ordinary shepherd's staff to something God would use?**

**How is the staff described in verse 20?**

**What happened that changed the staff between verse 2 and verse 20?**

## 3. How is the staff utilized?

**After releasing the staff and reorienting it for God, how will it be utilized by God and by Moses? (vs.17)**

Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness with an ordinary staff herding sheep and goats. He may have even worn out several staffs over the years. But, when Moses let go of that staff, and it became God's staff, well...that moment changed the world. God took a broken man and his ordinary staff, and He set the children of Israel free.

## Apply

**What do you have in your hand that God is asking you to give up?**

**How Can You Get Involved In God's Mission?**

**Pastor Tony gave us three ways we can be involved in missions:**

**1. You Can Pray.**

**2. You Can Go.**

**3. You Can Give.**

**What will YOU do?**

## Pray

Father, we realize You do not need us, but just like Moses, You are willing to use us to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ to others. Thank You. Give us the faith, courage, and discipline to pray, go, and give to missions. Amen.

## Dig Deeper

**4:1** Moses' first two protests (3:11, 13) were of the formal sort, properly expressing humility before such a great assignment, but here his words revealed the presence of uncertainty in his mind. God had already assured him in unmistakable language that the Israelite leaders would listen to him (3:18): now he wondered if he could be sure that this would happen—that they would believe his claim that the Lord<sup>63</sup> had appeared to him and do what he said (“obey me”; NIV “listen to me”). This sort of timidity did not constitute the sort of disobedience that the outright plea for relief from the task that he would express in his fifth and final protest (4:13), but it clearly represented at least an initial concern for how easily others would accept God's promise at face value. Moses was not doubting God's promise, but he certainly was afraid the Israelites would doubt it. Fortunately, God was prepared to reassure him with three signs he could use to overcome the doubt he was bound to encounter.

**4:2–5** Moses appeared to welcome this sign, by responding promptly and obediently to each command, even when he had to take hold of a snake he had just run from. The fact that his common wooden shepherd's staff could become a snake and vice versa would, in the absence of trickery, be a perfectly convincing demonstration of divine power in itself. Although it is not specifically so stated, the presumption here is that this sign could be done over and over again, for various groups of Israelites as they were encountered, because Moses would routinely have had his staff with him. There is, however, a greater import to the use of the staff than derives merely from its availability: this is the beginning of the development of the concept that Moses' staff symbolized Yahweh's power, a concept that culminates in Moses' holding up the staff at the Battle of Rephidim as a symbol of God's throne (see comments on 17:16). The ability to perform this miracle at will would function as a credential for Moses, giving his report of a theophanic commission by the God of the patriarchs credibility with the oppressed and wary Egyptian Israelites.

Snakes are frightening to most people when suddenly encountered, and it is fully understandable that Moses should run from one that sprung to life from his staff. Nothing in the text suggests that this snake was poisonous, and nothing links it with the Gen 3 account of Satan in the form of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Moses simply did what most people would do in the same circumstance—ran from a snake that suddenly appeared in front of him until he could get far enough away to see whether or not it was poisonous.<sup>66</sup> The purpose was not to scare him or anyone else; the purpose was to help introduce Yahweh as the true God to people who didn't know him yet but who desperately needed his salvation. Yahweh's control of something as frightening as a snake, including his ability to make it materialize from a piece of wood, was evidence of his powerful reality.

**4:6–8** Now comes a backup miracle. God's words in v. 8 (“if they do not believe ... they may believe”) indicate that he knew how hard it would be for the Israelite elders to trust Moses. For them to join Moses in making demands on Pharaoh, who was persecuting them so severely and before whose power they

had previously always succumbed, would indeed take some convincing. This second miracle is generally similar to the first in that it involved the changing of something harmless into something harmful and then changing it back, and again, would be something Moses could do repeatedly (putting his hand inside his garment to his chest and pulling it out again) to convince various groups of people at various times that God was with him.

The skin diseases lumped under the English translation “leprous” (*měšōra’at*) here would include not only actual leprosy but also a variety of serious infectious skin diseases that were likewise feared in biblical times. Elaborate precautions were taken to avoid contact with persons so infected (Lev 13–14; Num 5:2; Deut 24:8–9; 2 Kgs 15:5; 2 Chr 26:2; Luke 17:12), and immediate cures, like that in this demonstration miracle, were never expected. But could this miracle convince people who had not been convinced by the first—as the wording of v. 8 implies? The answer is yes. There was a strong association in ancient thinking of disease with the power of the gods, specifically their judgment/punishment power. A major function in ancient religion, as in modern, was that of offering sacrifices in worship to various gods and goddesses to appeal to their ability to withdraw disease from a supplicant. For Moses to say, in effect, “Look what Yahweh can do with disease!” was virtually to ask, “Can any god you’ve been worshiping heal like this?”

**4:9** This third proof-of-commission sign is of a grander sort: it anticipates the first plague (7:14–24) in which water—mainly from the Nile in the case of the plague—is turned into blood, hinting at the fact that God had in store some serious threats to unleash upon the Egyptians, which he would first demonstrate, through this sample, to his own people. The third sign, in other words, was not so much about Moses as it was about Egypt, and specifically the Nile. For God’s servant Moses to demonstrate through this simple act God’s power over the Nile would be to demonstrate God’s power generally over Egypt and the Egyptians *a fortiori*.

**4:10** Moses’ statement in this verse has generated much misunderstanding on the part of those who have not recognized it as a ritual protest, and it has thus often been taken literally, as if Moses actually either had a speech defect or was incompetent as a public speaker or had forgotten his Egyptian. In fact, Moses did a huge amount of speaking in the remainder of the Pentateuchal narrative and law, yet nowhere did he reveal the slightest speech hesitancy or inability to make himself understood. Why, then, did he make the claim to be “slow of speech and tongue”? The answer lies not in physiology but in culture—in the style of ancient Near Eastern “exaggerated humility,” often employed in situations where one is appealing for help or mercy from someone else or showing one’s mannerly self-deprecation at being given a great assignment. The following are among the parade examples of this style in the Bible:

Gen 18:27: I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. (Abraham)

Exod 4:10: I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue. (Moses)

1 Sam 9:21: Saul answered, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?”

1 Sam 18:23: David said, “Do you think it is a small matter to become the king’s son-in-law? I’m only a poor man and little known.”

1 Sam 24:14: “Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?”

1 Sam 26:20: Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the LORD. The king of Israel has come out to look for a flea—as one hunts a partridge in the mountains.”

2 Sam 9:8: Mephibosheth bowed down and said, “What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?”

2 Kgs 8:13: Hazael said, “How could your servant, a mere dog, accomplish such a feat?”

1 Kgs 3:7: You have made your servant king ... I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. (Solomon)

Isa 6:5: Woe is me!... For I am a man of unclean lips. (Isaiah)

Isa 56:3: And let not any [official] complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

Jer 1:6: Ah, Sovereign LORD, ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. (Jeremiah)

1 Cor 2:3: I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. (Paul)

Eph 3:8: Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me. (Paul)

1 Tim 1:15: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (Paul)

Heb 13:22: Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

Of particular interest for their close parallels with Exod 4:10 are Saul’s claim to be obscure in origin when he was in fact from a prominent family (1 Sam 9:21); David’s claim to be a nobody when in fact he was already a popular war hero (1 Sam 18:23); Hazael’s claim to be no better than a dog when he was in fact already a major leader in Syria (2 Kgs 8:13); Solomon’s assertion that he was only a child when in fact he probably was at least thirty years old at the time he became king (1 Kgs 3:7); and Paul’s claim to be the lowest of the low among God’s people (Eph 3:8; 1 Tim 1:15) when in fact he was an influential apostle. The closest parallel of all is that of Jeremiah’s protest (Jer 1:6), in which he claimed to be unable to talk, something he then did quite eloquently for the next forty-one years.

All of these parallels point to the simple fact that Moses was not speaking literally here but figuratively, responding to a great assignment with the proper sort of exaggerated humility and self-effacement expected and valued in his culture. There is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that he had any lack of skill in speech, public or private—and overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

**4:11–12** This *hieros logos* might seem to be tailored to the ritual protest Moses had just made, in that God referred to his control over human ability to speak. However, the fact that God also cited his control over human ability to hear and to see (v. 11)—issues not in dispute since Moses did not claim to have any hearing or vision problem—shows that it is more a general encouragement for Moses, his protest having been figurative rather than literal. The promise of help in knowing what to say and how to say it (v. 12) is relevant to any prophetic call since what prophets do above all things is *say* what God teaches them to say. The NIV’s “I will help you speak” (*’ānōkî ’ehyeh ’im pîkā*, v. 12) means literally “I will be with your mouth” and is exactly what God promised to both Moses and Aaron in v. 15. In light of the absence of any concern about Aaron’s ability to speak publicly, this is simply further evidence that Moses likewise had no speech defect. As the giver of all gifts, God knows people’s gifts and calls them to his service—and supports them in it—accordingly.

**4:13** The NIV idiomatically renders Moses’ request here, which is literally, “[He said] ‘Please, my lord, send by you will send,’ ”<sup>80</sup> a somewhat elliptical expression unattested elsewhere in the Bible and one apparently designed to mean, “I don’t want to do it” but worded as neutrally and non-offensively as

possible. The same sort of sense might be implied in English by: “With all due respect, sir, you must know someone who’s available to send.”<sup>1</sup>

**4:14–17** The NIV has made translation assumptions in v. 14 that are only one set of possibilities for accurately representing the sense of the original. In fact, the first part of the verse probably is better translated: “Even though the LORD was angry with Moses, he said, ‘Is not Aaron your Levite brother? I know ...’ ” In other words, the verse appears to assert that Moses’ protest in v. 13 was not acceptable to God but rather aroused his anger, and yet the verse does not necessarily go on to assert that the provision of Aaron his “Levite brother” was the result of anger but rather that it was the result of grace.

This is, again, not unlike the situation of Jonah, whose refusal to obey God’s command to preach repentance to Nineveh aroused God’s anger but who nevertheless experienced God’s grace in the form of the large fish that unexpectedly appeared to keep him from drowning. Here Moses’ brother Aaron is provided unexpectedly as a helper to Moses (so Zipporah, as well, in another sense helped Moses continue his ministry [4:24–26]). Moses presumably had no way of knowing before this that Aaron had set out to find him, but the idea that Aaron would do at least some of the speaking once they were in Egypt, so that the hostility generated by that speaking would not fall exclusively on Moses, must have been welcome encouragement indeed. In other words, Aaron was provided as a cospeaker for Moses, not because Moses could not speak well but because of the encouragement Aaron would bring to Moses in the daunting task of facing the hostility of the pharaoh of Egypt.

Verse 15 makes clear that both Moses and Aaron would speak for God, and this was in fact the case. Moses eventually did the vast majority of the speaking, with virtually no mention made of Aaron’s public speaking beyond the early chapters of Exodus—but at first Aaron was either speaking for him or with him (4:30; 5:1). Presumably, as Moses’ courage and faith increased, the need for Aaron’s close collegial support and/or public representation of his brother lessened. Verses 15 and 16 together also suggest that, from the first, Moses was the true prophet (the one into whose mind God placed his words with the intent that they be passed on to others) and that Aaron was Moses’ spokesperson rather than a direct recipient of God’s revelation. Thus God was the revealer; Moses, the prophet; and Aaron, the public repeater, an arrangement not unlike that in the modern church involving God, the Scriptures as the location of his word, and the preacher as the public repeater. Although at first Aaron primarily would have repeated verbatim what God had said to Moses and would not have expounded upon it as does the modern preacher, the role of priest certainly involved teaching in the sacred assembly, as a number of subsequent texts demonstrate.

Verse 17 highlights the importance of Moses’ staff, an object that plays a significant role in the exodus story. The staff is the ultimate immediate reassurance, in this final set of *hieroi logoi*, of God’s presence with Moses as he enters upon the challenging task to which he has been called.

#### Excursus: Moses’ Staff

In ancient Palestinian-Israelite society, one’s staff was an essential personal possession, a means of protection and identification and even a symbol of one’s power. Various Hebrew terms are translated “staff.” It is possible to use them rather interchangeably here in light of their semantic overlap and render them all with the English word “staff” just as “rod,” “staff,” “big stick,” and “walking stick” can all be used largely interchangeably in English. From the point of view of identifying oneself, a staff was in certain ways the equivalent in ancient culture of what a passport, wallet, or driver’s license would be today. From the point of view of protection, it was the ancient equivalent of what a sidearm would be today. From the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 128–136.

point of view of its function as a symbol of one's personal power, a modern analogy might be one's photo ID pass or even, in some situations, one's parking pass. It is likely that women often carried staffs; however, as it happens, the only references to staffs in the Bible involve men.

A staff was so basic and prized a possession that it might be mentioned metaphorically as the only thing a person possessed, or the first thing in a short list of very basic possessions, as reflected in Gen 32:10 ("I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups") or Luke 9:3 ("Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money").

In many cases a person's staff apparently was carefully carved with various markings and/or words to make it uniquely identifiable both by the owner and by others who might be familiar with the owner. An example of this practice is reflected in Gen 38:18 ("He said, 'What pledge should I give you?' 'Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand,' she answered"; cf. Num 17:2, 9; 2 Kgs 4:29).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, [Exodus](#), vol. 2 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 138–139.