

“What’s in Your Hand?”

Exodus 3:1-15 & 10-16

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Why is there suffering?

Job lost everything, even his family and health. He angrily questioned God demanding to know why. God responded with a series of questions that Job could not even begin to answer demonstrating that we with our finite knowledge and understanding cannot comprehend the infinite wisdom, power, and ways of God. God scolds Job’s friends for their attempt to explain Job’s suffering with their false assumptions and critical attitudes. God scolds them for suggesting that Job suffered because of his sinfulness or failure to be faithful.

We cannot answer the why question. Our attempts to explain why are feeble. If we assume and theorize, we are like Job’s scolded friends. When tragedy strikes, I focus on what I do know. Pain, death, and destruction never has the final say rather our gracious savior Jesus does. God loves us perfectly. God wants the very best for each of us. God came to us on earth, endured plenty of suffering, then enjoyed a glorious resurrection, so all of us can experience the majesty of heaven for eternity. Every tear, heartache, and disappointment will be wiped away by Jesus. Life, love, and joy flowing from God for eternity have the final say. Enjoying perfect loving relationships with God and one another has the final say by the grace of God. Earthly peace flows from trusting resurrection and knowing there is nothing we can do and nothing that can happen to us that will hinder our eternal salvation.

But what about this interim period on earth? What are we to do? How are we to live? What should our response be to suffering? Perhaps we can find some insights from Moses’ story. You may recall how Moses miraculously survived. Pharaoh feared the Israelites and their swelling population, so he ordered all Israelite baby boys to be killed. Moses was placed in a floating basket in the Nile where Pharaoh’s princess found him and raised him in the palace.

Moses saw his people oppressed, forced to work long hours in brutal conditions. Moses likely prayed for the deliverance of his people. He became more and more frustrated with the situation. Why doesn’t someone do something? Why doesn’t God do something? One day he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Israelite slaves. He could not take it any longer. Overcome with anger he came to the rescue of the slave, killing the Egyptian in the process, and then he hid his body in the sand. The next day Moses was even more disheartened when he saw two of his own people fighting with one another. He confronted them asking them, why. They responded, “Who are you to be our judge? Are you going to kill us like the Egyptian?” Fear grabbed Moses as he realized the news of his murder was spreading. He fled Egypt to Midian before Pharaoh could punish him. Moses became a shepherd. Years passed, he married Zipporah and had a son. One day Moses perceived God through a burning bush. God told Moses, **Exodus 3:7 “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.”** We can be certain that God is with us and each and every person throughout the world. God identifies with every person who suffers in anyway.

God goes on to explain that God will deliver the people to a good land. I am sure Moses was overjoyed that God was finally going to liberate the Israelites, until God said, “I will do it by sending you to bring my people out of Egypt.” Moses immediately objects. “After all God, don’t you remember how I prayed for the people back in Egypt? I couldn’t stand the suffering any longer, so I took matters into my own hands and trying to alleviate a beating I ended up killing an Egyptian. Remember God how I tried to break up a fight between

two Israelites, and they basically said, 'Get lost.' I ended up fleeing for my life. God I did my part. I tried to make things better. I am comfortable here now. I have a good paying job and a family. I am almost eighty years old. I want to enjoy my grandchildren and retire. Maybe get a nice cabin on the Red Sea. The people have been oppressed in Egypt for almost 300 years. When I was younger, I tried to make a difference. No not me, not now. The challenge is too great. How do you expect me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt? God said, 'I will be with you Moses.' That's nice God, but who should I say is sending me? What is your name?" I suspect there is some verbage edited out of the story here. I bet Moses had plenty of why questions for God. Instead of a nice explanation to any of his questions God says, "I Am Who I AM now go to Egypt." Moses protests again. "Look they won't believe me. They won't do what I tell them. They'll never believe that you appeared to me. The challenge is too great. The situation is too desperate. No, not me, I am not going." God asks Moses, "What is in your hand?" Moses replies, "a shepherd's staff." The shepherd's staff represents Moses' identity, his income, and his influence. God asks him to lay it down and to put his whole self in. God would use Moses' shepherd's staff as a sign, so the people would believe; but, Moses first had to lay it down.

God has a call for all of us. It probably won't come through a burning bush. The call may barely be discernable. It may come through circumstances that seem like coincidences. All calls are equally important. Everyone has a vocation. There is no hierarchy. We can all be great, because we all can serve. God calls us to share love with everyone, to be the best student, spouse, parent, worker, friend, and neighbor we can be. I believe we are all called to be extension cords. First we firmly plug ourselves into God the source of all love, joy, peace, hope, and life and then we connect with someone else and let love, joy, peace, hope, and life flow through us. We are called to know Christ, so we can show Christ.

If we want God to use us to our full potential then we must put our whole selves in, holding on to nothing. Realizing that everything is God's and offering all we have and are to God's service.

Moses had plenty of doubts and objections. God did not explain why or how everything was going to happen. God did not equip him with a bunch of super powers. God promised I will be with you.

If you're having trouble discovering your call, then Pastor Bill Hybels suggests pondering the Popeye moments in your life. Do you remember Popeye the sailor man? He would be pushed and pushed and finally he would say, "I've had all I can take. I can't take no more. Then he would eat his spinach and take action." Where in your life have you had all you can take and you can't take no more? Is it suffering? Is it spiritual emptiness? Is it violence? Is it poverty? Is it unloved children? Is it selfish leadership? Is it disease? Is it illiteracy? Is it hopeless people that need to experience God's grace? Is it something else? Bill Hybels calls this your holy discontent. For Moses it was the oppression of his people. Once you have identified your holy discontent then ask God what God wants you to do about it. Moses struggled in this area. I suspect he regularly prayed for the liberation of the Israelites; however, he did not expect God to answer that prayer by sending him to liberate the people. All of us pray in the Lord's Prayer 'thy will be done,' so we should be prepared for God to answer that prayer by calling us to help bring about God's will.

Moses, with God's help, liberated the Israelites. God works amazing miracles today. Your call may be an enormous high profile task or it could be to make a difference in one person's life. In both situations, in time, multitudes of people will be affected by the way you live your life and your response to God's call.

Pastor Rick Warren says all of us need to consider, what is in our hand and then be willing to lay it down to further the kingdom of God. He challenges us and all churches to spend less time fighting about what the church is against and more time proclaiming what the church is for. The hope of the world is Jesus. Jesus is the head of the church. We are Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus commissioned each of us to share God's grace and resurrection with everyone. God is calling you to make hope a reality for others.

Suffering is temporary. Abundant, joyful, loving, resurrection life is eternal. In the interim, God is working through you to comfort the world. Give your whole self to the service of God. Amen