

FAITH IS STRENGTHENED BY A FRIEND

Third in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Living by Faith* from Exodus 4:10-16 and 27-31

“Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses, and He said, ‘Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.’” Exodus 4:14

The Nile River is the watery thread around which Egyptian civilization developed. At 4184 miles, the Nile is the longest river in the world and the only major one to flow south to north. The ancient Egyptians viewed the Nile as the source of life, and the Pharaohs sent expeditions to discover the Nile’s source, the origin of life. But its beginning point was blocked by hostile tribes and thousands of square miles of swamps, and the pharaohs never found where it started. Thus the Nile became sheathed in mystery and overlaid by religious myth.

It was not until the mid 1800s that two Victorian Brits, attempted to do what no one had done before—to find the beginning of the Nile. Richard Burton, a renowned linguist, came up with the idea to avoid the river entirely. In 1857 he enlisted his friend John Speke to join him in a trek from the east coast of Africa and search for a “great inland sea.” The two explorers set out full of optimism. But weeks passed into eight months of hardship. Then they discovered Lake Tanganyika. By this time Burton was almost unable to walk, and Speke was temporarily blind—and deaf. (He had dug a beetle out of his ear with a knife.) Burton was convinced they had found the headwaters of the Nile, but Speke was not so sure. Burton headed home to recover his health, and Speke pressed on alone. In 1858 he found an even larger lake which he named after the queen—Lake Victoria. When he returned to London with his report, he touched off a feud with his now former friend, Burton.

Christian missionary David Livingstone was in London when Speke returned. Livingstone’s life mission was to open Central Africa for the gospel, and in 1866 he secured a commission from the Royal Geographic Society to settle the dispute between Burton and Speke. For six years he wandered the heart of Africa. No one knew whether he was alive or dead. A New York newspaper in a publicity stunt, sent reporter Henry Stanley to find Livingstone. He located the missionary explorer in what is today Tanzania. You know what he said when he met him: “Dr. Livingstone, I presume!” A few weeks later Livingstone confirmed that Lake Victoria was indeed the source of the Nile. Except that Livingstone was wrong. Anyone who has watched the movie *African Queen* knows that Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn chugged down a dangerous river to get to Lake Victoria, so the headwaters of the Nile must be farther up! It took until this year--March 31, to be exact—for a New Zealand explorer named Cam McLeay to identify a spring in the mountains of Rwanda as the farthest tributary of the Nile. It added another 66 miles to the known length of the river—now at 4250 miles.

This is a long way around to get to Moses, who was himself a long way from the Nile, as he tended sheep deep in the desert of the Sinai Peninsula. But at the burning bush God commissioned Moses to make his way to the Nile River and to Pharaoh, and free the people of Israel from slavery. That required faith, and when it came to faith,

Moses had a lot to learn. Today we turn to the fourth chapter of Exodus. We'll discover three things about faith that will help us in our spiritual journeys. **1. Faith is grounded by reality, 2. Faith is affected by our feelings, and 3. Faith is strengthened by a friend.**

1. Faith is grounded by reality. In the first verse of Exodus 4 Moses asks God a very good question as he contemplates his new assignment. Moses wants to know, *"What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you.'"* This is a legitimate concern. Moses is saying, "I come walking up to the people and I say, 'God has sent me! You're supposed to follow me!' Why should they believe me?" Let's put this in another context. What do you tell your kids to do if a stranger pulls up to them in his car, opens his door, and says, "Your mom and dad told me to take you home?" You tell them to run! In the same way, if a religious leader claims to speak for God, do you believe him? Should you believe me as I preach to you this morning? There had better be some convincing proof before you swallow what somebody tells you. Faith is not just mindless acceptance. It's not closing your eyes and wishing something to be true just because it's spiritual. There are tens of millions of Americans today who are believing anything and everything without giving it a thought. In our country we've never had more idiocy being passed around as spiritual truth. Faith—real faith—demands concrete, objective proof. And God knows that. He cares about your brain. He doesn't want you misled by false teachers. In the following verses he gives Moses three proofs so the people have a reason to believe.

The first proof is in verses 2-5. He draws Moses' attention to the staff he's holding in his hand. A staff is the symbol of rule and authority. The hand of Egypt, if you will, had been heavily against Israel. Now Moses' hand will hold the power. In verse 3 God commands Moses, "Throw your staff on the ground!" When Moses did that the staff turned into a serpent, and Moses jumped back, startled.. If you recall the mask that adorned the mummy of King Tut, in the center of his headdress there's a cobra head. The cobra was the symbol of the pharaoh, like the seal of the President of the United States represents the American president. In verse 4 God tells Moses to reach down and pick up the snake by the tail, and when he does, it turns back into a staff. Who has greater power, the pharaoh or the One who renders the pharaoh impotent? Point made.

The second proof is in verse 6. God tells Moses to place his hand into his bosom, a bit like the pictures you see of Napoleon. When Moses pulled it out, his hand had turned leprous. In the ancient world, and even into our own time, leprosy was an incurable disease. As Moses gazed at his hand he must have been horrified to see what had happened to it. But God told him to stick it back into his bosom (v7) and when he pulled it out once more, it was perfectly healthy. God was demonstrating that he is the God who afflicts and who also heals. Health and blessing are in his control.

Then there was the third proof. In verses 8-9 God said to Moses, "If the people don't believe the first miracle, maybe they'll believe the second. But if they don't believe the second, then go down to the Nile and scoop up a bucket of water and pour it out on the dirt. When you do that the water will turn to blood." The Egyptians believed

that the Nile was the source of life. They even worshiped the river as a god. So here the true God was proving that he has control over life and death and over all the gods of Egypt. The myth of the Nile was shattered! Now, Moses wrote this account three and a half thousand years ago. We didn't see these miracles. Should we just believe the Bible? The answer is yes. We have the witness of history. We didn't see these things with our own eyes, but the historical proof is convincing—partly because this is the explanation of how Israel got out of Egypt and become a nation. But more than that, we have the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel accounts report that Jesus endorsed what was written in the Old Testament. Why should we take the word of Jesus? Because Jesus himself performed miracles. He did things no human being could do unless God gave him supernatural power. The miracles of Jesus are historically verifiable, especially his resurrection from the dead. It's a completely provable historical event. Friends, believe the Bible because it has the stamp of proof upon it. God doesn't mess with your mind. Our faith is grounded in reality.

2. Faith is affected by our feelings. After all that Moses experienced, we'd expect him to be buoyed by this concrete proof and to march off to Egypt by the power of his faith in God. His faith had to be at an all time high, strengthened and confirmed. But look what happens. In verse 10 Moses says to God, *"Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."* The way Moses expresses his concern could mean several things. He might have had a slight speech impediment. Or perhaps he's saying that it's been forty years since he spoke Egyptian and he's lost his fluency. Several years ago Paul Gilchrist, the former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America, expressed a similar concern to me. He was born in Chile and as a child spoke perfect Spanish. But when he was about twelve years old his missionary parents were expelled from Chile, and Paul hadn't spoken Spanish much for perhaps fifty years. We were going to Mexico together for some meetings and Paul had been asked to teach a seminar for a group of pastors. He said to me, "I don't feel confident enough to do this without an interpreter." I encouraged him and over the next several years I watched his ability to speak in Spanish return to perfection. Maybe Moses felt that way about Egyptian. Or maybe it was Hebrew. He hadn't used his Hebrew much in the past forty years either. Or maybe Moses is saying that he didn't think quickly when he tried to speak publicly. Charles Spurgeon was the greatest preacher in the world during the middle and late 1800s. He preached to thousands of people every Sunday at his church in London. Spurgeon didn't select his sermon topic and text until Saturday night and then went into the pulpit with only a few hastily scratched notes. The man was spontaneously eloquent. That's sure not me. I labor over what I am going to say to you on Sunday mornings. I spend hours preparing. I could stand up here and be spontaneous too, and sometimes I am tempted to try, but I know you'd catch on and wouldn't be back the next Sunday. Do you suppose I am like Moses? Let's not go there!

God answers Moses in verse 11. "Come on, Moses! Who do you think made your mouth?" And then in verse 12 God says, *"Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."* Notice what Moses says in reply in verse 13. He's still afraid to go. He says to God, "Please, Lord, just send someone else."

He had just seen God's miracles, he believed God in his head, but he just doesn't want to do it. At our church staff meeting last week one of our staff quoted what someone had told him about a task he'd asked this person to undertake. It began with a string of excuses, until I finally interrupted and said, "Stop. I'm not interested in the reasons why something can't be done. I already know them. I want to hear how we can do this in spite of the obstacles!" Look at verse 14. "*Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses.*" Now Moses had gone and done it. He'd gotten God mad at him. Ordinarily, you don't want to do that. It's not especially smart, if you know what I mean.

Why is it that in spite of our faith and confidence in God, we still don't seem to trust God to help us or to empower us to do what he's called us to do? You get fearful, don't you, and find yourself worrying about all the things that can go wrong in your life. And yet God has promises to help you and to supply your needs. You find yourself weak when you face someone's disapproval, don't you, and sometimes you compromise your faith. Yet God has promised to stand with you. I'm the same way. And that's how Moses was. "Lord, pick somebody else." Why are we like that? Because faith is not simply a matter of the mind. We're not like Spock in the old *Star Trek* TV series who had no emotions. To him everything was a factor of logic. But he was a Vulcan. We're human! You and I can know God is perfectly able to provide for us, but we are nevertheless affected by our feelings. Who gave you your emotions? God did. And sometimes our faith wavers not because we lose confidence in God in an intellectual sense, but because our faith is colored by our feelings. And God knows that!

Look how he responds to Moses. In verse 14 he says, "*Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.*" God had already called a helper for Moses. Notice the level at which Moses' brother Aaron will engage him. "*When he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.*" That's the emotions. It's at the level of feelings, at the precise place where Moses has the need. Are you afraid? Are you concerned about things God has called you to do? Your feelings will affect your faith. If we are to live by courageous faith, then we need others to stand with us. If we are going to accomplish things for God, we need a comrade. People who love us build up our faith. As a congregation we face a decision about whether we should purchase land for our Dutch Fork Campus and put a building out there. It will cost a lot of money. That makes some of us nervous, and that's to be expected. But if we determine God wants us to do this for his kingdom and his glory, with the vision that thousands in the future may come to know Jesus, then we had better stand together and strengthen each other's faith. It is not a question about whether God is able to supply the means. He is! It's a question of how we feel, and we'll feel a whole lot better knowing we're in this together as God's people. Mutual faith makes us glad, and when we're glad, we have stronger faith!

3. Faith is strengthened by a friend. Now I want you to see how this worked out in practice for Moses. First of all, notice in verse 27 where Moses and Aaron met. "*He went and met Moses at the mountain of God.*" Back in Exodus 3:3 we're told that Moses was already there, tending sheep at Mt. Sinai. How did Aaron know where to go? We don't know how Aaron found Moses. God has a way of bringing his people together,

even when they're not expecting it. I was on an airplane several years ago. An older African American gentleman was sitting in the seat beside me. We said little for most of the flight, but then I noticed his Bible. It turned out the man was John Perkins, one of the truly great African American Christian leaders, a man whose work I was familiar with and whose books and articles I had read. John Perkins has tremendous credibility and I admired him greatly though I'd never met him. We had a marvelous time sharing our mutual faith and encouraging each other. Was that just a coincidence? No. God put us side by side on that plane. You may be a student in high school or a college student starting your first year. Maybe you are looking for a fellow believer at work or in your neighborhood. How do you find one who shares your faith and who can help you to be strong? Ask God to connect you. And then note the clue in verse 27. Aaron and Moses met at the mountain of God. Go where God is. It's where you're most likely to find other believers. God will bring a fellow servant of Christ into your life, to encourage you.

Second, notice what happened when Moses and Aaron got together. Verse 27 says Aaron *"kissed him."* He expressed affection. These two were brothers, separated for most of their lives, but they formed a friendship. And then look at verse 28. *"Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him to do."* Moses unloaded. Can you imagine what it must have been like to experience the burning bush and not to have anyone to tell? Moses was bursting. Friends tell each other what is happening in their lives. They share hopes and fears and in the telling, they forge an emotional link that strengthens their faith in God. Then notice verse 29. *"Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel."* Moses had been afraid to go to Egypt, even with God's assurances. Now with his brother, his friend, they marched into Egypt and got the job underway. What do you need to do in your life? It will be easier if you have a friend to share your faith and your task. Finally, third, see the effect that this pair's faith had on others. Verses 30-31 tell us, *"Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped."* The church of God was revived and strengthened!

One man needed a friend to exercise faith. God sent another man to be that friend. And the world changed forever. You and I need Christian friends. That's why the fellowship of the church is so important. I urge you to be involved this Fall in an adult Sunday school class, a small group, or one of our ministries. I urge you to bring your children to Sunday school each week and have them participate in the youth ministry. Some parents seem to think that these activities for their kids are optional, but your kids need fellowship too in order that their faith grows strong and they live faithfully for Christ. But this is not just for your benefit. God calls you to be a friend to others, to love and encourage them so that other believers may be strengthened in their faith. Friends together find the source, not of the Nile, but of winning faith. Then they change the world.

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