

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

November 15-21, 2020

Sermon Series: Being Jesus

Week Three: “Jesus @ Work and School”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God send the light of Your Son into our lives anew today. Let Your presence touch our minds and hearts with Your mercy, grace, and truth. Direct our thought, speech, and steps to the end that we may walk in Your way today and always. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Many people like to try to make Christianity out to be a black and white answer to the gray areas of life. But we don’t live in a world that is naturally slanted toward faith. The assumption of the existence of the sacred has taken a hit by years of focus on science and the temporal world. So how do we as Christians live out the sacred in a world that doesn’t just naturally accept that there is anything but the secular? How do we live in a world that may even be antagonistic toward the sacred? How do we live out the sacred in a secular world?

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

Moses had become an ordinary man doing an ordinary job when he was called upon to do the extraordinary. How often has God called upon each one of us to go beyond what was ordinarily expected? How many chances in a week do we get to change someone else’s life for the better? In what ways can we use our position at work or school to advance the cause of Christ?

Sunday Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:1-12 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

Whose flock was Moses tending at the beginning of the passage, and in what two ways is that person described? (3:1a)

Where does Moses lead the flock to? (3:1b)

In what form did an angel of the LORD appear to Moses there, and what was unusual about the sight? (3:2)

What did Moses hear when he decided to take a closer look at this sight? (3:4)

How does the speaker Moses hears identify himself, and how does Moses react? (3:6)

What does the speaker say he has seen and heard? (3:7)

What has the speaker determined to do on account of what he has seen and heard? (3:8)

What surprising command does the speaker then give to Moses? (3:10)

How does Moses first respond to this command? (3:11)

What assurance does the speaker give Moses, and what sign does the speaker promise to Moses to assure him of his identity? (3:12)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

If we have read the passage just prior to this one, we undoubtedly wonder why the name of Moses' father-in-law has suddenly changed from Reuel (see 2:18) to Jethro (see 3:1).

We might also wonder why Horeb is called "the mountain of God" in the passage.

We probably wonder about the shift in language from "the angel of God" appearing in the bush, to "God" speaking to Moses from the bush.

We almost certainly wish we could better visualize just what it was Moses saw, and why he was so willing to approach it to investigate.

We might ask why it was necessary to take off sandals to stand on holy ground – why were bare feet somehow more "holy"?

We might wonder what traditions Moses had received about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and what the speaker's identification as their God meant to him.

We might also wonder why Moses was so afraid to look closer at the voice speaking to him.

We could ask why other peoples should have to give up their homes for the sake of these escaping Hebrew slaves.

We almost certainly ask, along with Moses, "Why Moses"?

Finally, we might wonder how exactly a trip back to this mountain would serve as a sign that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the one who sent Moses.

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Exodus 3:13-4:17; Exodus 6:2-7:7; Luke 2:8-20; Joshua 5:13-15; Genesis 12:1-9; Genesis 15:16; 2 Kings 25:21

Our Scripture passage for this week is really just the beginning of a lengthier story about God calling Moses to be the one to deliver the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The full story extends all the way from 3:1 through 4:17, at the burning bush, before picking up again from 6:2 through 7:7, after Moses returns to Egypt and continues in dialogue with God about his appointed task. This running dialogue with God is, in fact, the primary characteristic of this entire story. The significance of this dialogue cannot be overstated – consider the fact that what we see here is the Creator of the universe inviting a human being, Moses, into a genuine conversation about the task God is calling Moses to undertake. Along the way, there is disagreement, argument, and even challenges issued in both directions! It is not a story of simple deference in the divine presence – rather, the story demonstrates the potential for further revelation of God's presence through the human quest for clarity with regard to the call.

The story begins with Moses going about his business tending his father-in-law's flocks near Mount Horeb, "on the far side of the desert." We are told that Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was "priest of Midian," but God's revelation of Himself does not take place in any religious context, but out in the world, in Moses' ordinary "workplace." Moses did not go out that morning in search of a revelatory experience of God – he went out that morning, as he likely did every morning, to do his job of tending the flocks. Yet God chose this ordinary, non-religious place to reveal Himself to Moses. Perhaps the story will remind us of the fact that God also appeared to a group of shepherds tending their flocks thousands of years later, as they announced the birth of Jesus Christ (see Luke 2:8-20). Clearly, God often chooses the most ordinary settings as the place where He speaks to us.

What Moses sees is a bush that is on fire but not burning up. But notice that the reader of the passage knows, immediately, something that Moses does not yet know – that it is an "angel of the LORD" appearing to him within the flames of fire. In fact, the sight is not a burning bush, per se, but flames of fire coming from within the midst of the bush without consuming it. Notice also that Moses is not frightened by what he sees, but rather, he is drawn to it by basic curiosity. God does not actually call out to Moses until Moses has taken the first step of going over to look more closely at this amazing sight. What this sequence of events demonstrates here is the fact that Moses' curiosity, and his willingness to investigate something out of the ordinary, have led directly to his dialogue with God. When we allow ourselves to be drawn into the possibility of an encounter with God, God responds.

When God calls Moses' name, Moses replies with the simple statement "Here I am." It is only when God identifies Himself as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" that the narrator informs us that Moses averts his eyes in fear, because he is "afraid to look at God." Don't miss the fact that what this implies is that God was *visibly* present. It was not a disembodied voice that Moses heard, but a "theophany," an actual *appearance* of God that Moses could have *seen*, had he not recognized that he could not look into the reality of God's holiness and live. It is God's presence at the physical site that makes the ground holy – there was no inherent holiness to the site prior to God's appearance there. This is an example of what the people of God have understood as "sanctification" – the setting apart of an ordinary part of the natural world for divine use. Anything can be "sanctified," or "made holy,"

through the presence of God, whether it is a plot of ground, a church building, an altar ... or a human being. In the ancient world, the removal of shoes was a sign of respect and reverence, so God asks Moses to submit to this custom (see Joshua 5:13-15). It was a symbolic act demonstrating the setting aside of what is contaminated by the “uncleanness” of the world (“dirty”) in the presence of a perfectly pure God.

It is in verses 7-10 that God takes the initiative in informing Moses of the purpose of this encounter with the divine. Notably, this is the first time God speaks directly in the book of Exodus, and it sets the rest of the story of Exodus into motion. Throughout these verses, God speaks of Himself, and of His relationship with His people, as we see clearly in verse 7 and verse 10 – “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt ... I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” These enslaved Hebrews are God’s chosen people, the descendants of the relationship begun with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-9. Moses is called to act on God’s behalf for these people, with whom God is in intimate relationship. The words from the NIV, “I am concerned about their suffering” are more literally, “I know their suffering” – using the Hebrew word for an intimate interpersonal relationship. What this implies is that God deeply feels and experiences Himself what the Israelites are enduring in Egypt. God is not an absent king dispatching a subordinate to handle a matter of little personal relationship to him – rather, God is described as participating in their suffering, and choosing to act to save them from it. This, again, is a prototype for God’s ultimate participation in the suffering and salvation of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is this same relationship with Abraham, and the promises that God made to Abraham, that give context to a question that might trouble us today. God tells Moses that He is going to rescue the Israelites from their oppression, and give them the land that is the “home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.” The question that might trouble us is, “why should these other people have to give up their homes, or make room for these Israelites?” But as the passage from Genesis demonstrates, God had originally promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, even though now those descendants have spent 400 years in Egypt. These other tribes have moved into land that God has intended for Israel, and now God is acting to fulfill his promise, and restore the land to Israel. According to Genesis 15:16, this displacement of the local tribes is judgment upon their evil ways. If this is troubling to us, we need to remember that God also took the land back away from the Israelites when they rejected God later in their history (see 2 Kings 25:21).

Returning to our passage, Moses’ only previous words have been “Here I am;” but now, his words are “Who am I?” In a typically human response, Moses’ initial readiness to participate in this dialogue has turned into reluctance once the details of the task have been revealed. His question is the first of many that reveal a strong sense of personal inadequacy to accomplish what God is asking of him. As mentioned in the opening paragraph of our study, it is through this ongoing dialogue that Moses receives more and more clarity as God reveals more and more of Himself to Moses – even revealing the divine name YHWH. But the essence of God’s reply to each of these challenges from Moses is what God first tells him – “I will be with you.” The assurance Moses gets is of a constant divine presence. Moses may not know who he himself is (“Who am I?”), but God knows exactly who *He* is (“I am who I am”). Moses will not have to act alone. Without Moses’ even asking, God provides a future sign that Moses can use, from that future, to be reassured that his calling was genuine. By returning to this same mountain, Moses will know that God always keeps God’s promises, and that God’s people will reach their Promised Land destination through the cooperative efforts of God and Moses. Notice that it is,

indeed, to be a cooperative effort from the start - while *God* has “come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians” (3:8), it is *Moses* who God is sending “to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (3:10). God rescues the Israelites, using Moses to accomplish that task.

So, here’s the bottom line - God calls each of us from our ordinary lives, inviting us to participate in His work of transforming the world. While we may feel inadequate to the task, if we are truly called, God will assure us of His presence so that we might successfully accomplish the work.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Has your curiosity ever led you into a dialogue with God? Did that conversation end with a conviction that God was calling you to a specific task?

Are you surprised Moses does not simply accept what God says without question? How does Moses’ pursuit of the dialogue with God open the door to God’s further revelation? How are you pursuing a dialogue with God?

What does “sanctification” or “holiness” mean to you? Do you have a sense of the “sacred” as opposed to the “ordinary”? What do you hold sacred?

Do you think God still sees the misery and suffering of those who cry out from oppression? What do you think it looks like, today, for Christians to “know” the suffering and misery of people living in oppression? How deeply do you identify with such people?

Can you give testimony to the reality of God’s assurances to be with you as you fulfilled something He called you to? How was that presence made known to you?

Does the story of Moses’ call help you to live in anticipatory expectation of hearing God calling you in ordinary circumstances? This week try to be attentive to the “burning bushes” in your surroundings!

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we give You thanks that You take the initiative in calling out to us in the midst of our everyday, ordinary lives. Help us to recognize You in those moments, and not to overlook the opportunity to partner with You in Your transformational mission. When we feel inadequate for the tasks You lay before us, help us to hear the assurance of Your presence. We pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.