

Text: Exod. 3:1-10

Title: "Israel's declaration of independence"

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Introduction: July 4th is our country's Independence Day, and we all understand why. It was on July 4th, 1776 that our founding fathers declared their independence from King George of England. America still had a war to fight before she experienced this independence, but we still consider this declaration our nation's date of birth, the day she became independent.

That founding document more than any other describes the theological underpinning of our nation's commitment to freedom. It declares, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

That is America's theology of freedom. When the founders said, "We hold these truths," they did so by faith, faith first in the Creator who made men, and whose making of men endowed them equally with unalienable human rights. Our nation's Declaration of Independence expresses faith in our nation's Creator. Today, our political landscape struggles with human rights and freedom, because our nation now

endeavors to understand this blessing without the foundational faith in the God who created and endowed them.

We have come to a section of Exodus, that runs through chapters 3 and 4 of this book, which describes God's call of Moses to become Israel's deliverer. It will be chapter 12 before the independence of Israel from Egypt is something they experience, but here in chapter 3, the call of Moses begins with God's declaration of independence for His people. I want us to see four things God declares in this declaration of His people's independence from bondage.

I. God declares His unapproachable holiness (vv. 1-5).

Illustration: Our passage anticipates the importance this mountain obtains later in the Exodus narrative as Mount Sinai, where God gave His law to His people. This place is actually very important in church history as well. Today, there stands St. Catherine's Greek Orthodox monastery in this place, which contains the world's oldest continually operating library. It was there that one of the four oldest manuscripts of the New Testament was discovered, called *Codex Sinaiticus*, which was copied in the fourth century.

Application: But I think our passage asks us to begin with the understanding that when Moses went to this place for the first time to allow his sheep to graze, it was not a place of world-renowned fame. Our translation calls it the "backside of the desert" (v. 1). But in spite of its insignificant remoteness, a little thorn-bush and the ground around it became a very special place. It was a revelation of the angel of the Lord there that made it so (vv. 2-4).

Wherever we see mention made of the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, we who know our trinitarian doctrine

from the full revelation of the Son of God in the New Testament have a very hard time not seeing the Second Person of the Trinity in these Old Testament scenes.

The strongest objection against doing so is that the New Testament uses the Old Testament over and over to identify Christ with the OT Lord or Yahweh, but it never refers to the angel of the Lord in a passage like this one to do so. I think the reason for that is that the 1st century world was enamored with the worship of angels, so the New Testament writers had to emphasize explicitly that Christ was far more than a mere angel (Col. 2:18; Hebrews 1).

That said, it is clear from what the New Testament teaches about the pre-existent Son of God, that He must have been the One present in the bush on this day. It tells us that He was God and with God (John 1:1). It tells us that unlike the Father, whom no man has seen, He is the mediator who has been seen by men (John 1:18).

And the Old Testament, when it tells us that he would come as a human descendant of David who is born in Bethlehem, also tells us that “his goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2). There is a sense in which His birth in Bethlehem was not His first coming forth.

And so, what made this thorny-bush and the ground around it a special place was the fact that the angel of the Lord, the preexistent Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the One who became Jesus our Savior, spoke from the midst of the bush as Yahweh, the one true God (v. 4). The place Jesus reveals Himself and speaks is a special place in two respects: (1) it is a holy place; and (2) it is an unapproachable place (v. 5). It was not the thorn-bush that made it so, but the divine presence of Christ.

C. H. Macintosh: "The character of the dwelling-place takes its stamp from the character of the Occupant.

"The application of this to the Church, which is now the habitation of God, through the Spirit, is of the very utmost practical importance. While it is blessedly true that God, by His Spirit, inhabits each individual member of the Church, thereby imparting a character of holiness to the individual; it is equally true that He dwells in the assembly, and hence the assembly must be holy. The centre round which the members are gathered is nothing less than the Person of a living, victorious, and glorified Christ. The energy by which they are gathered is nothing less than God the Holy Ghost; and the Lord God Almighty dwells in them and walks in them. (See Matt. xviii. 20; 1 Cor. vi. 19; iii. 16, 17; Eph. ii. 21, 22.)" (2:44).

When our church gathers in a place at a time, we do so under the promise of a special revelation of Christ's presence. Christ's keeping of that promise makes that time and place holy, and there is something about holiness that should make us fear to approach, reverent, and respectful.

Illustration: Imagine that it was your duty to argue an important case before the US Supreme Court this week. Would you show up late? Would you leave early? Would you wear flip flops and a tee shirt so that you are comfortable? Would you climb up on the raised mahogany bench, seated there with your feet dangling down, while making your arguments before the justices? No? Why not? Well, because that is not your home. That is a special place. You have a proper fear of the justices that causes respect. That courtroom holds a sacredness that makes it unapproachable by many of the common practices that we are comfortable with in our homes.

Moses is given that lesson about this little bush and the patch of dusty dirt around it. He learns his lesson well (v. 6b). Our worship assembly time is a time that the Lord calls us to in which He promises to reveal His presence through His Word and through His assembled people in a special way. His presence makes the gathering holy, and even unapproachable. It should not be of concern to us that unholy people are afraid to be a part of this. God's power rested on the church so that people were afraid to attend (Acts 5:13-14). This is not our home; it is not a sports arena; it is not the local hangout. This is where Jesus promises to meet us.

One final thought about the unapproachable holiness being declared by God here. The declaration comes from a little thorn-bush, combined with fire in such a way that the fire does not consume the bush. The Bible tells us that we need to worship the Lord with reverence and fear because He is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). But His glory does not burn or consume the little bush of thorns. Instead, God speaks from the midst of those thorns.

I cannot help but be reminded of Christ's humanity, which bear a crown of thorns but was not consumed by the presence of His deity. His humanity was not much to look at, but it was the one humanity that was not consumed by the glory of deity. Fire in the thorn-bush points me to the God who became perfect man, in order that He might bear a crown of thorns and die for you and for me.

II. God declares His covenant to the fathers (v. 6).

Illustration: I read in my devotions this past week Acts 9, where on the road to Damascus Saul is mightily saved and converted into the man who became Paul. C. H. Mackintosh noted how he, like Moses, had to spend much time on the back end of the desert in God's school before being used of

God to plant Gentile churches all over the first century world. I am reminded of the very first thing that Saul had to learn in order for his life to change this way. It was the answer to the question he asked after being blinded by that light, "Who are you, Lord?" The answer came back, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Application: Saul asked the right question, because God's declaration of independence from bondage for His people always begins with an explanation of who He is. That is the key truth. When it comes to deliverance, it matters little what they are. It matters everything who He is.

The Lord tells Moses that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were his fathers. He had grown up with pharaoh as his father, but the Lord does not say that. He speaks of Abraham, who is the father of all people of faith (Rom. 4:16, "Therefore [salvation] is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all").

Biblical religion connects sons to their fathers. The religious influence that segregates sons from their fathers is not biblical religion. Moses knew who his fathers were. God told him. His religion needed to be the same religion they had. Abraham could have gone to Moses's church. And Moses to Abraham's. And they could have done that without two separate kinds of worship services. Is Abraham your father because you share his faith in the promise of salvation through his Descendant? Can you worship with your spiritual fathers?

III. God declares His love for those in need (vv. 7-9).

Application: The Lord begins with *here is who I am*, and then He explains *here is what I am going to do*. Deliverance from bondage is His work, one that is motivated by His great love for those in need – *I have seen, I have heard, I am come down to deliver, I am come down to bring up, the cry came to me, I have seen*. Deliverance is all about what He is desiring and determined to do.

C. H. Macintosh: “He had not come down to see if, indeed, the subjects of His promise were in a such a condition as to merit His salvation; it was sufficient for Him that they needed it. . . . It was not on the ground of aught that was good in them, either seen or foreseen, that He was about to visit them, for He knew what was in them. In one word, we have the true ground of His gracious acting set before us in the word, ‘I am the God of Abraham,’ and ‘I have seen the affliction of My people’” (45-46).

I was especially struck by the phrase in verse 7, “I know their sorrows.” That word *sorrows* is the word we find twice in the description of the suffering of Christ in Isaiah 53:3-4. The angel of the bush was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). He knew their sorrows as the One who would bear their sorrows in order to deliver them from bondage. He knows the sorrows of our bondage too. Trust Him for deliverance today.

IV. God declares His choice of a human instrument (v. 10).

Application: God’s declaration of deliverance seems like a great one to Moses until this point. Still the Lord sent Moses, and He sends us too. How have we responded to our “Come now, I will send thee”?

Conclusion: Only Jesus is the perfect human instrument of deliverance who never hesitated when called upon to deliver you and me. How can we hesitate when He calls upon us to help Him deliver others in His name?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching