

I. Introduction:

- A. I'm calling this message, *"Taking the Bull by the Horns,"* but there is an obvious slight of hand involved there.
1. To *"take the bull by the horns,"* probably originated out in the old west cattle country.
 2. Sometimes it was necessary for a cowboy to get up close and personal with a stubborn steer, not just in a rodeo, but in real life.
 3. And of course the phrase has come to mean: dealing head-on with some particular problem.
- B. *"Grabbing the serpent's tail"* may be similar in meaning, but it runs a bit deeper, coming not from life but from the Word of God.
1. I have read this chapter many times & taught from it before, but I was usually hurrying on to other subjects.
 2. I've never delved very deeply into these five verses, but I think it might be a blessing to us all, if I do.
 3. So let's just have a little verse by verse Bible study.

II. Verse 1:

- A. *"And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee."*
1. When this conversation with God took place, Moses was standing barefooted before the burning bush.
 2. The Lord was giving this 80-year-old man His commission to lead Israel out of Egypt.
 3. He had revealed Himself as *"I AM THAT I AM... THUS shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."*
 4. What an honor to be used by God – no matter what He is commissioning us to do.
 - a. Our response should be: *"Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."*
 - b. Or, *"Lord what would thou have me to do?"*
- B. But that was not Moses' response. *"But, but, but..."*
1. Just five verses prior to chapter 4 the Lord had said, *"And they SHALL harken to thy voice..."*
 2. And still Moses *"answers"* God, saying *"But, behold, they will NOT believe me, nor harken unto my voice."*
 3. I hope you can see how applicable this is to all of us. How often do we talk back to God?
- C. Many writers commenting on this verse try their best to tone down Moses' words.
1. Some say he was only talking about the common people; the leaders would believe him, but not the rest.
 2. I suppose that some might reverse those two, because either way it is only conjecture.
 3. Others explain this by saying, *"Israel won't believe right away. What should I do to bring them around?"*
 4. And some try to insert *"a what if"* into the equation. *"But what if they don't believe me?"*
- D. Isn't the most honest interpretation of this verse that **Moses** is **convinced** they **will not believe** him?
1. He probably remembers what happened forty years earlier when he tried to rally the troops after defending one of them from an Egyptian bully?
 2. *"Who make thee a prince and a judge over us?"*
 3. There was no *"what if"* about it. *"Behold, they will NOT believe me, nor hearken unto my voice."*
 4. *"I don't trust anyone in Israel to believe that you have spoken to me or commissioned me."*
- E. Notice what Moses was doing.
1. He was transposing his worries, his unbelief, his excuses onto the backs of other people.
 2. He didn't have any right to say that Israel would not believe him, even if there was that likelihood.
 3. Moses was one of those *"the glass is half empty"* people.
 4. He was pulling a potential problem from tomorrow into his faithless heart that day.
 5. And it was ruining his fellowship with the Lord.
 6. If we want to truly enjoy the fellowship of our Saviour, we need to deal with our unbelief.

- F. I think we have grounds to criticize Moses, but we must do so humbly, because he was no different from us.
1. We can criticize or condemn Moses, because we know the end of the story.
 2. But we don't criticize ourselves, because through fleshly eyes and minds, we can't see into the fog.
 3. *"Lord, it is going to end up in a disaster."* Is that something we should ever try to tell the omnipotent God?
- G. Perhaps while looking askance toward Moses, we need to praise him for his good example.
1. Sure, he lacked faith and obedience, but what did he do about his problem and his lack?
 2. Wasn't this essentially, *"Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief."* He took his problem to God for a solution.
 3. In a round about way, he admitted he had a problem, and he took it to the perfect resolution station.

III. Verse 2:

- A. *"And the LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod."*
1. The Lord is so gracious; so understanding.
 2. *"A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory."* – **Matthew 12:20.**
 3. God didn't even say, as I quite often do in my great superiority – *"What did I just tell you?"*
 4. **Exodus 3:18** – *"they SHALL harken to thy voice..."*
- B. God didn't rebuke His servant, as He was justified to do. He merely asked, *"What is that in thine hand?"*
1. Moses may have been still yattering away, but he was forced to stop. *"What am I holding?"*
 2. *"Lord, as you can see it is my shepherd's staff. It is one of the tools I use to direct and help my sheep."*
- C. Of course, the Lord didn't ask the question because He didn't know what it was.
1. God doesn't ask questions like this in order to learn something.
 2. We see this time and time again, where God asks similar questions. They are to **make US focus.**
 3. *"Pay attention. I am going to use something you know very well, but in ways you have never seen before."*
 4. *"Look into that BARREL, and notice how little oil or how little grain there is right now."*
 5. *"What is in that barrel? Water you say? Dip some of it out and take it to the governor of the feast."*
 6. Moses was holding a shepherd's crook, and it may have been 6 or 8 feet in length.

IV. Verse 3:

- A. *"And (God) said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it."*
1. That 6 foot rod became a serpent when it hit the ground, and it was probably still 6 feet (4 cubits) in length.
 2. That is no small snake. And if it was a cobra, I think we could say that it was an exceptional serpent.
 3. Some cobras can even spit their poison with deadly accuracy; they don't have to strike their victims.
 4. I wonder how far away from his body Moses tossed his staff? I probably wouldn't have tossed it very far.
 5. But no matter how far it was, it wasn't far enough for a man in bare feet.
 6. After 40 years on the back side of the desert, Moses was very familiar with the serpents of the region.
 7. This was probably as terrifying as anything the Lord might have done.
- B. At this point I am tempted to follow the example of the commentaries, but I'm going to restrain myself.
1. Moses fled from a **huge snake**. He didn't look down and picture the **devilish serpent** who beguiled Eve.
 2. I doubt that he immediately thought about the **serpent-god** of the **Egyptians**, or that Pharaoh often used serpents to represent his power and authority.
 3. I have no inclination to allegorize this serpent, or even to use it to represent something more than it was.
 4. It was a huge and deadly snake. Period.
 5. While saying that, I will add that snakes are among the most feared of all creatures, and to look at this as a picture of our worst fear is not doing disservice to the text.
 6. Is anyone going to criticize Moses for jumping back and running a few steps from this thing?

V. Verse 4:

- A. *“And the LORD said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand.”*
1. Why wasn't Moses bitten by this serpent? It was certainly within striking range.
 2. The **herpetologist** might say that the snake was initially disorientated, giving Moses a chance to escape.
 3. Someone else might point out that just because it was a snake, it might not have been venomous.
 4. The true answer is that God didn't want the serpent to strike; that was not its purpose in this case.
 5. And the truth is: most of the problems in our lives are not there to kill us, but to strengthen us and push us closer to the Lord.
- B. Obviously, there were two miracles there that day: the creation of the serpent and then its disappearance.
1. You might say that one was a negative miracle, while the second was more positive.
 2. But both were under the complete control of the Lord.
 - a. The arrival of that cancer is no more out of God's will, or control, than its miraculous cure.
 - b. The Lord might permit some fool to start a wildfire, and the Lord may send the rain just before that fire hits your house.
 - c. Jehovah is not some powerless idol. He is in sovereign control of all things.
 3. Ideally, Moses should have as much confidence in grasping the serpent's tail as grabbing his old, familiar shepherd's rod.
- C. My wife and granddaughter have forced me to watch enough wildlife shows to learn that the very worst place to grab a venomous serpent is by the tail.
1. When my 3 foot long arm grabs a 6 foot long snake by the tail, the more dangerous end of that snake will probably come swinging around toward me in just a second or two.
 2. The place to grab a live snake is by the neck; that is just behind the head.
 3. But God specifically told Moses to grab its tail. Maybe the poor creature was trying to slither away.
 4. Whether that was true or not, it was still not the logical thing to do.
 5. But the terrifying serpent, under the command of God, instantly became a comforting & useful tool again.
- D. This may be a digression of sorts, but it is applicable: Please turn to **Acts 28**:
1. Luke calls the people of Melita a barbarous, but kind-hearted people. They were not godly or believers.
 2. When Paul was out gathering firewood in the midst of a storm, he was attacked by a poisonous viper.
 3. It was not just a strike, but the venomous beast hung on his hand, pumping his poison into Paul's body.
 4. But Paul just shook the snake into the fire and went about his business without showing any ill effects.
 5. Immediately the idolatrous people thought that Paul must have been a criminal, but when nothing happened their opinion changed: *“This man must be some sort of god.”*
 6. Through that event, an opportunity was given to present the gospel to the governor of the island.
 7. The serpents of life, when surrendered and submitted to the Lord, can bring about eternal blessings.

VI. Verse 5:

- A. *“That they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.”*
1. Was there anyone present that day beside Moses? Were there any witnesses to this pair of miracles?
 2. Yes, there was a similar miracle in Pharaoh's palace, when Aaron's rod was cast down and became a serpent, but then so did the rods of Pharaoh's priests, albeit Aaron's then devoured the others.
 3. But that miracle certainly didn't impress Pharaoh and apparently no Israelites were present.
 4. Remember **verse 1** – *“And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.”*
 5. How could this private miracle, miles from any of the people of Israel, help Israel to believe God or Moses?

- B. Jehovah had no intention of turning Israel into a democratic nation.
1. God's proper government is a theocracy, where He is King; He is in charge.
 2. When Korah decided he'd like to have as much power as Moses, he was spectacularly judged by the Lord.
 3. God had chosen Moses to be the prime minister in His theocratic kingdom.
 4. But after stumbling decades years earlier and aimlessly meandering for forty years, Moses had become unfit for effective leadership.
- C. How did God encourage the faith and obedience of Israel? By strengthening His chosen leader, Moses.
1. Israel needed a lieutenant governor who could trust the Lord during the coming days of trial and testing.
 2. The wrath of Pharaoh is going to be as scary as a 6-foot cobra. *"Moses, can you trust God to defeat him?"*
 3. The **impassable Red Sea** is going to be as daunting as the Rocky mountains in a blizzard.
 - a. *"What is that in thy hand, Moses? Your old shepherds rod?"*
 - b. *Hold it up and watch the waters part to the right and left."*
 4. *"Are you hungry Israel? Have you ever eaten rattlesnake? I will take care of you,"* the Lord says.
 5. When **Moses** becomes the commander God wants him to be, in character, faith and submission, the people of Israel will be the people He wants **them** to be.
- D. None of us have to be a Moses, a Joshua, or a Paul to learn the lessons of faith.
1. We **all** have serpents coming into our lives, even at the command of the Lord.
 2. If, at the command of the Lord, we be grab their tails, each and every one of them can become instruments of righteousness for the glory of our Saviour.
 3. And we will become leaders worthy of guiding our families, our friends, or our nation toward the Lord.