

Facing the Challenge **(Exodus 4:18-31)**

Every journey begins with a first step. God had confronted Moses at the burning bush and sent him to set the Israelites free from their bondage in Egypt. Although Moses objected to God's plan, he at last obeyed. He faced the challenge. He took the first step. From that point forward Moses had to rely on God every step of the way. Only God could perform such a mountainous task. But God would use Moses, His appointed leader, in accomplishing that task. Obeying God begins with the first step—only then will we find God's further direction.

**When we set out to obey God's will,
we'll ask others to make sacrifices with us (4:18-20).**

The spiritual life is never a solo effort. We need others, including family, friends, and the community of God's people. Moses began his journey back to Egypt by first enlisting the support of his family. His family, like Moses, would have to make sacrifices in order to fulfill God's plan.

Moses sought his father-in-law Jethro's blessing (4:18).

Apparently, the fire in the burning bush disappeared with God's final charge to Moses. Moses was again surrounded by the ruggedness of the desert and the bleating of sheep. He made his way from the isolated region of Mount Sinai back to Midian. There, Moses spoke with his father-in-law Jethro (also called Reuel). Jethro had been kind to Moses and had even given his daughter Zipporah to Moses as a wife. It was a necessary courtesy for Moses to request Jethro's blessing on his endeavor. However, Moses didn't reveal to his father-in-law all that transpired on Mount Sinai. He simply asked Jethro for permission to return to Egypt and check on the condition of his family in that land. Jethro readily granted Moses his blessing.

Moses took his family and set out staff in hand (4:19-20).

It appears that, subsequent to His revelation at the burning bush, God again spoke to Moses in Midian. God assured Moses that those who sought his life in Egypt had died. There had been a change in leadership. The new pharaoh would have known of Moses as a past curiosity at best. With this fact in mind, Moses gathered up his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, and made his first steps toward Egypt. By now Moses had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exodus 18:2-4). It's impossible to know how old they were at the time of Moses' departure for Egypt, but at least one of them may have been very young at the time. Moses also took with him to Egypt his shepherd's staff, the "staff of God," just as God had instructed him to do (4:17).

**When we set out to obey God's will,
we'll find God's ongoing guidance and direction (4:21-23).**

Because Moses had taken his first step in obedience to God, God gave him further instructions and encouragement.

God gave Moses instructions concerning the use of miracles (4:21).

Yahweh God again spoke to Moses, instructing Moses to perform His miraculous wonders in the presence of Pharaoh. These miracles would come, of course, from the power of God working through Moses. However, despite a series of momentous miracles, Pharaoh would harden his heart against God. God, too, would actively harden Pharaoh's heart. This hardening of Pharaoh's heart on the part of God is puzzling until we realize that Pharaoh first hardened his heart against God and that God has the absolute right to mete out His judgment on sin as He sees fit. Moses needed to know that he was heading into a challenging situation.

God gave Moses instructions concerning the firstborn (4:22-23).

God gave Moses additional instructions about the message he was to deliver to Pharaoh. Moses was to tell Pharaoh about Yahweh God. It was Yahweh who commanded Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Moses was to tell Pharaoh that Israel was Yahweh's son, His firstborn son—God's privileged heir. God ordered Pharaoh to release the Israelites so that they could worship Him. Eventually Moses would have to tell Pharaoh that God would take the life of Pharaoh's own firstborn son because Pharaoh would refuse to let God's firstborn son, the Israelites, go. The final plague on Egypt would prove this warning to be true.

**When we set out to obey God's will,
we'll experience a process of cleansing in our lives (4:24-26).**

Something unusual and even enigmatic took place along Moses' journey to Egypt. Subject to various interpretations, this passage certainly demonstrates the importance of personal purity and radical obedience to God.

Moses faced God's judgment (4:24).

Early in Moses' journey to Egypt he, along with his wife and two sons, stopped at a place of lodging, possibly little more than a lightly inhabited oasis. There, Yahweh God "met him" and was about to "kill him," most likely meaning Moses (although some think this refers to Moses' uncircumcised son). Why would God commission Moses only to attempt to take his life along the road to Egypt? And how was this threat to Moses' life evident? Some think Moses contracted an illness. Others hint that the Angel of the Lord confronted him with death. The reason for this impending judgment seems to be connected with Moses' failure to circumcise his son.

Zipporah circumcised their son (4:25).

Zipporah interceded, possibly because Moses was debilitated and could not now fulfill the necessary function. She took a sharp flint knife, not uncommon in that day, and circumcised their son. Since only one son was involved, it seems sensible to believe that Moses had

circumcised his older son but had neglected to do the same to his younger son. This neglect may have been in deference to Zipporah, since circumcision was required among the Israelites (Genesis 17:9-14) but not among the Midianites. Whatever the case, Zipporah stepped in, circumcised their son, and then placed the bloody foreskin at Moses' feet. (Some suggest that she placed it at the feet of the Angel of the Lord.)

By touching Moses' feet with the child's foreskin, Zipporah was associating the act of circumcision with Moses' responsibility before God. (Could it be that Moses's bare feet that stood on holy ground now had to again be made holy by radical obedience to God's command regarding circumcision?) Zipporah then said to Moses, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," referring to the act of circumcision (verse 26). Some take this statement as Zipporah's way of showing disapproval of circumcision while others take the same statement as Zipporah's affirmation of Moses' relationship to God's covenant as affirmed through circumcision. With no further reason to assume a rift between Moses and Zipporah, it seems cautiously preferable to see in her words an affirmation of Moses, his relationship to God's covenant, and her participation in that covenant through marriage. It may be that this incident also pointed out the dangers involved in Moses' task and prompted him to send his wife and sons back to Jethro at this time (Exodus 18:1-6).

God released Moses for service (4:26).

With this act of obedience completed, Moses was once again free to follow God's call. Yahweh God spared Moses' life, releasing him for service. This unusual account may serve as a reminder that even those who are called by God must live out that calling in radical obedience to God.

**When we set out to obey God's will,
we'll see that God keeps His promises along the way (4:27-28).**

God never fails to keep His promises and this fact becomes most evident when we pursue His calling in our lives. God promised to reunite Moses with his brother Aaron, and God kept His promise.

God sent Aaron to meet Moses in the desert (4:27).

Yahweh God had already instructed Aaron to leave Egypt and meet his brother Moses in the desert. How Aaron escaped from Egypt can only be a matter of conjecture. How he found Moses is likewise unknown apart from the guiding hand of God. Having left his family behind in Midian, Moses traveled back to Egypt by way of the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, possibly to get one more glimpse of the place of his special encounter with God. There, Moses and Aaron were reunited. Having been separated for forty years, this must have been a wonderful reunion. Aaron found Moses and kissed him, a fitting show of love and respect for long-separated brothers (Genesis 33:4; 45:14-15).

Moses told Aaron about his encounter with God (4:28).

What a story Moses had to tell his brother! Yahweh God had appeared to him on the very mountain where he and Aaron were reunited. God had commanded Moses to rescue the Israelites. Moses told Aaron everything God had said, and he described to Aaron the miracles God had empowered him to perform. God kept His promise by reuniting Moses with Aaron and God blessed Moses by giving him a brother and confidant in the work that he was to accomplish. Rarely does God expect us to serve Him by ourselves. We need others in order to be successful in accomplishing God's will.

**When we set out to obey God's will,
we'll prompt others to grow in their faith and worship (4:29-31).**

The first challenge facing Moses in Egypt was convincing the Israelite elders that God had spoken to him. But his obedience led to God's blessing, and the Israelites recognized the fact that God was about to act on their behalf. Their redemption was drawing near!

Moses and Aaron gathered the elders and revealed God's plan (4:29-30).

Moses and Aaron arrived back in Egypt where they brought together the Israelite elders. Aaron acted as the spokesman, telling the elders everything Yahweh God had said to Moses. Either Moses, or Moses and Aaron together, then performed the miraculous signs God had given them (compare Exodus 7:19: 8:5, 16). One can imagine the stunned look on the faces of the elders as Moses' rod became a snake and his hand became leprous!

The people believed what they heard and worshiped God (4:31).

At this point the elders of Israel "believed." They believed that God had "visited" them, coming to their aid. They believed that God had seen their misery. They believed that Yahweh God had revealed Himself to Moses. Their belief, their faith, prompted them to bow down and worship. When God acts, His people worship. When God's people worship, God acts. Worship and blessing go hand in hand. Moses, a leader in the making, was now positioned to confront Pharaoh in the name of Yahweh God. He'd learned many valuable lessons along the way, one of which is the importance of absolute obedience to God. Obeying God begins with the first step—only then will we find God's further direction.