

Reasons to not serve God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 March 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 01] Remember the aged Jacob heading to Egypt, filled with the expectant joy of a father having and enjoying a re-encounter with his long-lost son Joseph.
- And we read in the account of that return, or rather of that journey of Jacob to Egypt, we read that God spoke to Jacob on that journey.
- And he cried out from heaven, Jacob, Jacob. And Jacob replied, Here I am. God went on in that conversation, in that word to Jacob.
- He went on to make great promises to Jacob concerning how in Egypt he would make of his descendants a great nation.
- Promises that he most surely kept. Well, four hundred years have passed, and no further direct word from God, until another aged man, a great, great, great grandson of Jacob, tending his sheep, minding his own business, hears an identical call and responds in an identical way.
- [1 : 29] Only the name, obviously, is different. Moses, Moses. And Moses responds, Here I am. Now, after four hundred years of silence, what matter of such transcendence would merit this call from heaven to the aged shepherd?
- Nothing less than the liberation of the people of God, the rescue from slavery of the very nation made great in Egypt, and yet now groaning under the yoke of slavery and oppression.
- And Moses is God's man for the rescue of his people. Moses is God's man to declare to unenslaved people that a way of liberation, a way of salvation, has been provided.
- A promised land, flowing with milk and honey, awaits all who will but believe and follow the one who calls them.
- Now, this is all very stirring, perhaps, and yet also ancient history. What has this to do with us? What has this to do with you?
- [2 : 48] Well, we too. You too, Christian friend, like Moses, have been called for this selfsame rescue mission.
- We are God's servants to announce the way of salvation, opened up for all who languish as slaves to sin and to self, to lead such to a promised land of reconciliation and friendship with God.
- And God has many people in this city. God has many people in the city of Aberdeen. And it is our calling and mission to show them the way of liberation, the way of salvation.
- And so he calls you by name. And how will you respond? How will I respond? Will we respond with these same words of Jacob and of Moses?
- Here I am. Now, the task is immense. The need around us and surrounding us is gargantuan. The opportunities are beyond number.
- [3 : 59] And are you willing to work for God? Are you willing to give of your time, of your resources, of yourself? I think we all instinctively, as it were, hold back.

We are afraid of the unknown, of what it will involve. We tremble at the cost of commitment. And we may be, grope around for reasons not to serve God, for reasons not to respond to the call that he makes upon our lives.

Well, there is nothing new under the sun, for Moses did the same. And this morning, what I want to do is to consider how Moses responded to the call of God, to consider the reasons that he gave for not obeying.

And we will see, as we consider them in the course of these two chapters, see how many ring uncomfortably true to our own experience.

But we will also consider how God responds to the reasons given by Moses. And may God speak to you as we consider the words especially of God to Moses.

[5 : 20] We will be looking at responses of Moses to the call of God, mainly, as we will see, reasons for not obeying. Though one or two other, we will notice that maybe couldn't be described as reasons for not obeying.

Hopefully that will become clear as we consider them each in turn. But before we do that, it's only fair to notice that Moses begins well in the first response to God calling him.

We've already noticed how God called him. He called him in the burning bush, Moses, Moses. And how does Moses respond? Well, we've read the passage in verse 4 of chapter 3.

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, that is, Moses had gone to see this spectacle of the bush that was burning but was not consumed, God called to him from within the bush, Moses, Moses.

And Moses said, Here I am. And so, so far, so good, we might say. Now, God goes on to explain to Moses what it is he would have him do.

[6 : 31] And this is when the problems begin. And the first reason Moses gives for not obeying, we discover in verses 10 and 11.

And let's just read those two verses and then see how we can summarize or paraphrase this first reason that Moses gives. In verses 10 and 11, we read, So now, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

But Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? The first reason we could put in these terms, Moses says to God, I'm not worthy of such a task.

I'm not worthy. Moses responds with such seeming humility. Who am I? This old man, this aged shepherd, this man who in the past attempted to perform such a feat but failed miserably, who am I?

Who am I to do this task? I'm not up to the job that you're giving me to do. I'm not wise enough. I'm not holy enough. The task is too great for the likes of me.

[7 : 49] Now, I say that Moses responds with seeming humility. Now, it's maybe a little harsh on Moses. There is, I imagine, and I think I could say I'm sure, a measure of genuine humility.

This is, after all, the Moses, 40 years previously, pompously believed he could single-handedly rescue the Israelites. You know the story well of how he struck down the Egyptian and imagined that he could lead perhaps a rebellion and a liberation of his people.

But he failed miserably. And hence, we find him now in exile in Midian. And so, as he considers his own life history, considers his past failures, considers his real and not supposed but genuine limitations, he considers that the task that God is asking him to perform is simply too great for him.

I'm not worthy. I am not up to this. Who am I for such a task? He has moved on, in a sense, and in a measure, positively, from the pride and the self-assurance of the past.

But he has gone to another extreme in considering himself unable for the task given. And before we think of how God responds to that seemingly legitimate concern, what about you?

[9 : 24] Is God calling you? Indeed, the question is an inappropriate question, for if you are a Christian, then God is calling you.

Indeed, even if you're not a Christian, God is calling you. He's calling you that you would put your trust in Jesus. And if you are a Christian, then he is most assuredly calling you to his service.

And what is your response to the call of God? Do you know something of the attitude of Moses? Who am I? I'm not worthy.

Perhaps some of you, even the prospect of being a Christian is one that you think is beyond you. I'm not good enough to be a Christian. I couldn't live as a Christian. And for those who are believers, perhaps as you consider how God would call you to reach out to those who are in slavery to sin and to self.

And you say, I could never speak to others about Jesus. I could never help out in this or other work in the church. I could never be a leader at a camp.

[10 : 29] I could never preach a sermon. I could never do these things. And maybe with Moses you say, I've tried, but I've failed in the past. Or maybe with Moses you would say, I'm too old. Or maybe you say, I'm too young.

There can be a multiplicity of reasons given behind these words. Who am I? Who am I for this task? Well, how does God respond?

How does God respond to Moses? And how does God respond to us? In verse 12, And God said, I will be with you. I will be with you. This is the crucial point.

This should be more than sufficient. I will be with you. In other words, God says, It's not about you. It's not about how worthy you are, or how able you are, or how charismatic you are, or however clever you are.

It's about me. I will be with you. I will help you. I will be by your side. It's about how worthy and powerful God is.

[11 : 31] And He will be with you. But not only does God respond by assuring Moses of His presence. I will be with you. He also assures him of a sign.

We read that in what follows in that verse. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Now this is a very curious sign. I say it's a curious sign because it's a future sign. And if you put yourself in the shoes of Moses, Moses might say, Well, what use is this to me as a sign?

You're saying that once the people have already been rescued, then there'll be this sign. Well, I won't need a sign then. Once they're out of Egypt, once we've escaped from the bondage of Egypt, and we're rescued already, I don't need a sign.

I need a sign now. And yet God gives this sign. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain. And so I say a curious sign.

[12 : 37] And perhaps more than a sign, yes, indeed a sign, but more than a sign, this is a vision that has been given to Moses.

A vision to drive him, and to enthuse him, and to empower him. It's as if God is saying to Moses, Just imagine the scene, Moses. Today my people slaves in Egypt.

Today my people silent. They don't worship me. Some of them don't even believe in me. They question my power to help and to save. But just imagine this people worshipping together at this mountain, worshipping together the living and true God.

Imagine that. Notice that in verse 12, in this sign that is given, we read, When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Helpfully in the footnote in the Bible, we read there that the word you, in Hebrews plural. So God is not saying that when this happens, you, Moses, will worship me. God is saying, All the people will worship me on this mountain, when they have been delivered from a bondage.

[13 : 50] And so this sign is, as it were, a vision to enthuse Moses. Imagine this prospect, and be driven by the glory of this prospect.

And so with us, God calls us to look ahead to what He will do through us. Your friend brought to faith in Jesus Christ, a marriage restored, our children professing faith and serving the Lord, this church filled with men and women, worshipping the very God who calls us to reach out and declare His gospel.

And will this prospect, will this sign, will this vision, drive and inspire you to obey? So we have Moses' first reason and God's response.

I'm not worthy. I'm not up to the task. And God answers, I will be with you. But then we have a second reason that Moses gives for not obeying, and we find it in verse 13.

We read, Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is His name? Then what shall I tell them?

[15 : 03] Now the question that Moses anticipates seems a peculiar one, and we have to be clear, what Moses is doing is anticipating what the people might say. He doesn't know what they're going to say.

He is not prophesying what the questions might be. He's imagining problems. He's projecting himself to the difficulties that may present themselves.

And here he projects himself to this possible question. But this question that he imagines will be posed is this, What is His name?

Now this imagined question, if asked, would betray unbelief, in essence. This question, What is His name? is a question that could be put in other ways.

Who is He? Who is this God who has sent you? We don't know Him. We don't know who it is you speak of. Remember that 400 years have elapsed since God spoke to Jacob.

[16 : 03] The glory days of Joseph are well nigh forgotten by many. The people are in slavery. Indeed, the cry of the Israelites that God Himself says He is responding to and that is made reference to, that God Himself highlights on at least a couple of occasions in His words to Moses, this cry of the Israelites may well not have been a cry directed by the Israelites to God for help, but simply the cry of those who suffer, the groan of the oppressed.

Now that's not something we can be altogether certain about, but that is a distinct possibility that this cry that God says He is responding to needn't be understood as the people realizing their condition, crying out to the God of their fathers, crying out to the only living and true God, help us, but simply the cry of an oppressed people.

See, who might help? Who might hear? Maybe with little expectation of anybody hearing. And yet God does hear and God does respond. And so the second reason that Moses gives could be paraphrased in this way or paraphrased in this way.

He says to God, they won't believe in you. What's the point of me going and saying that I've been sent by God? They won't believe in you. They don't believe in you.

Moses is protesting that there is little point in offering salvation and liberation to the people in Egypt because they simply don't believe in God.

[17 : 38] And they certainly don't believe that He is willing and able to help. Now, when we think of it in these terms, is this not a very contemporary protest that we could make?

What's the point of preaching? What's the point of evangelizing? What's the point of telling people about Jesus? People today aren't interested. They're just not interested.

They're governed by a spectacular apathy with regard to anything to do with the gospel and the Christian faith. People aren't interested.

What's the point? What's the point of evangelizing? What's the point of telling them when they're simply not interested? Well, how does God respond to this reason that Moses gives for not obeying?

Well, we read there in verse 14. God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you.

[18 : 42] Now, this revelation of the divine name is worthy of many sermons, no doubt. But for our purposes this morning, suffice to say that God is impressing upon Moses one fundamental exhortation in response to his protests.

And it is this. God says to Moses, consider me. Consider who I am. Don't worry too much about them.

Don't be too consumed about what you imagine their prejudices are, their doubts are, their unbelief is. Don't be overwhelmed by them.

But consider me. Consider who I am. You could think of Jesus in the occasion in the New Testament.

Look at me and not at the waves. Don't look at the problems. Don't project yourself to all the possible obstacles there might be. And no doubt there will be.

[19 : 47] Look at me. I am who I am. Or to put it another way, God is saying to Moses, and he says to us, is their unbelief, those to whom we are called, is their unbelief greater than God's power to persuade?

What is greater, the unbelief of the unbeliever or the power of God? Consider me, says God to Moses, I am who I am.

So a second reason is given and a second response from God to Moses. But then we can move on to another reason that Moses gives for not obeying, and we can move on to the beginning of chapter 4 and in verse 1.

Moses answered, What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, the Lord did not appear to you?

Now this follows, and we've read the two chapters already, it follows a greater detailed explanation as to what will happen and what is to be done. And Moses listens to what God has to say, but here he comes up with another problem, another response, another reason for questioning the wisdom of the course of action being proposed.

[21 : 07] What if they don't believe me? What if they don't listen to me? What if they say, the Lord did not appear to you? What do these words betray of Moses?

What Moses really is saying here, not in these words, but what Moses is saying to God, and it is a solemn thing. Moses is saying to God, I don't believe you.

And you say, well, hang on, he doesn't actually say that. He says, what if they don't believe me? How can you twist that to say that God is saying, I don't believe you? Well, let's compare chapter 3, verse 18 with chapter 4, verse 1.

What do we read at the beginning of verse 18 of chapter 3? God is speaking to Moses, and what does God say to Moses? Moses, the elders of Israel will listen to you.

You can't get clearer than that. God says to Moses, the elders of Israel will listen to you. And then what does Moses say to God at the beginning of chapter 4?

[22 : 10] What if they do not believe me or listen to me? Now, you can't get more bold unbelief than that. God has just said to him, they will listen to you.

And Moses comes back, but what if they don't? What if they don't listen to me? What then? Well, let's not give Moses such a hard time or simply point the finger at Moses.

What about us? Do you believe God? Do you believe that He will be with you? As with Moses, He promises, I will be with you. Do you believe that He will be with you when you speak for Him and serve Him?

Do you believe that He will give you the words to say when you would speak for Him and of Him? Do you believe that He will not allow His word to return to Him void as He has promised?

Do you believe that He will build His kingdom and grow His church? Moses' problem is that he is struggling to believe. The Word of God is clear, but Moses struggles to believe God.

[23 : 24] How does God respond to Moses' struggle to believe? Well, really, the response of God is to be found in the following verses in chapter 4 from verse 2 through to verse 9, which time doesn't allow us to develop in any detail, but simply we have, as we've read, a series of signs that are given to Moses.

And I suppose you can summarize God's response to Moses' difficulty in believing in these words, I won't take no for an answer. And that, I won't take no for an answer directed to Moses himself.

He won't take no for an answer from Moses, but also, I won't take no for an answer from the Israelites to whom I am sending you. I will do what is necessary that they will believe.

If they won't believe your words, well, then a sign will be given. And if they don't believe the first sign, then there'll be a second sign. And if the second sign isn't sufficient, well, you get the idea.

I won't take no for an answer. Now, this is telling and encouraging, challenging and encouraging. First of all, for you, a Christian friend, God is saying, I don't accept your refusal.

[24 : 45] When you say, I can't, I won't, I don't accept your refusal. I won't take no for an answer. Nor will He accept, and this is maybe the encouraging part, nor will He accept the refusal of those He sends you to.

His saving grace is irresistible, and He will draw to Himself such as will be saved. And maybe just one other thing we can just notice very much in the passing.

There is perhaps help or instruction in noting that even on this occasion, where words were not enough, the words that Moses was to bring were accompanied by visible signs that the message would be received and believed.

So, is it not true that as we would present the good news of the gospel, yes, words are necessary, but they must be accompanied by visible signs. Now, they won't be staves that turn into snakes and hands that become leprous and then are healed again, but nonetheless, visible signs that confirm the truth of our words, the lives that we live, the service that we render to others, the love that we have one for another, visible signs that give substance and that substantiate the words that we proclaim, the message that we announce.

Moses says to God, I don't believe you. I don't believe they will. Listen. And God says, I won't take no for an answer. But then we have a fourth reason that Moses gives for not obeying.

[26 : 24] Perhaps one of the most familiar ones to us. we find it in chapter 4 and verse 10. Following the presentation by God of the different signs that will be possible, we then read in verse 10, Moses said to the Lord, O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant.

I am slow of speech and tongue. What reason is Moses giving now? Well, he's saying, I can't do it. I can't do it.

You can almost detect the tone of voice with which Moses protests, though that is a dangerous thing to presume to do. But, O Lord, I have never been eloquent.

I've never been able to do these things. I can't do it. The first objection that we considered, his first reason, who am I, perhaps did have a measure of genuine humility.

It wasn't justified. We're not saying that it was okay for Moses to respond, but we can, I think, reasonably presume that there was in that first objection of Moses, who am I, some genuine humility, but no longer.

[27 : 41] His I can't, rather smacks of, I don't want to. I don't want to do this. Now, no doubt, Moses did have his limitations, as we all do.

And the task that he was being asked to perform was a great one. The man who had spent 40 years speaking to his sheep must now present himself before the court of the most powerful nation on earth.

And it's understandable that he would say, well, that is not something I'm able to do. The arguments I'll need to present, the protests that I will hear the wise men of Egypt and all the arguments they'll put forward.

I won't be up to that. I can't do that. What about you? How often do you, like Moses, respond to God's call with these words, be they spoken or unspoken?

I can't do that. I can't do that. I can't speak. That seems to be very common for many of us. I'm not good at speaking. I'm not good at speaking to other people.

[28 : 48] That's not my thing. I can't stand up for God and be a voice for God in this perverse world, in this God-hating society, in this God-indifferent society.

I can't do that. Or maybe together as a congregation we have that sense or we echo the sentiments of Moses.

We can't reach this neighborhood. We can't plant churches in 21st century Scotland. We can't conquer, indeed, the whole of Scotland for King Jesus.

It's something we can't do. Hopefully, others will. We would love it to happen, but it's not something we can do. Well, how does God respond to Moses in verse 11 of chapter 4?

Again, really, the call of God is similar to what we have already encountered.

[29 : 54] What God really is saying to Moses is, look at me. Consider me. Consider who I am. Don't be obsessed or consumed or overwhelmed by your limitations.

Consider who I am. I can and I will help you. There in verse 12 where we read, I will help you speak what is literally said and it's interesting is this, I will be with your mouth.

God says to Moses, I will be with your mouth. That mouth that you think so little of, that mouth that you consider so incapable, I will be with your mouth. And he says the same to you, Christian friend, I will be with your mouth.

If you would speak for me, if you would declare that the beauty of Jesus, be assured, I will be with your mouth as you do so.

And then in verse 12, the words of God, reluctant to use the words, the impatient words of God, but the words of God, certainly the urgent words of God to Moses, following this, in a sense, unnecessary dialogue.

[31 : 11] Now, go. Go. Just go. Just do it. I've heard enough of your excuses. Now, go. We often do what Moses did.

We project future difficulties. What will happen? What will he say? What will they say? How will he respond? And God says, just go. Just go and just speak.

But then we have a final reason. And it's not really a reason, but a final response of Moses to God's call. And we have it in verse 13.

Sorry, this is a penultimate reason. We were getting hopeful there that we were nearly finished. But no, this is a penultimate reason in verse 13, where we read, but Moses said, O Lord, please send someone else to do it.

Please, someone else. Please send someone else to do it. We won't dwell too much on this. We've already shared a little bit about this with the children. Moses so politely asking that somebody else be sent.

[32 : 19] But this deferential speech masking really open defiance. And of course, this reason that Moses gives is a classic.

Through the ages, let somebody else do it. Somebody else can do this task. Somebody else can do this job. Not me. But God isn't calling somebody else.

Or if He is, it's none of your business. He's calling you. Now, no doubt there are occasions when an honest self-appraisal can lead us to legitimately consider that a given task is best performed by someone else.

No doubt that is so. But when God clearly and unequivocally would call you to serve Him and to speak for Him and to use the gifts that He has given you in His service, then it is you who must respond.

It is you who must obey, not someone else. And how does God respond to this protest of Moses, or rather this request of Moses that somebody else would be sent?

[33 : 22] We read in verse 14, and we've noticed this already, then the Lord's anger burned against Moses. God is angry with Moses, and He has right to be angry with Moses.

And this is the same God who calls you. He's the same God who calls me, and He is the same God who can be angry with me and with you when we would protest and we would stubbornly refuse to obey Him.

But then a final thing that I want to just notice in verse 18, and this, not so much a reason for not obeying, but the manner in which Moses obeys.

We read in verse 18 that the dialogue with God has concluded. There is a sense in which Moses is resigned to his fate and is perhaps reluctantly, but nonetheless, ready to obey.

But notice how he then addresses his father-in-law, Jethro. Then Moses went back to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, let me go back to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive.

[34 : 37] Now what is going on there? What I think that detects is, if we can paraphrase it in this way, Moses is saying, okay, I'll do what I'm told. I'll go to Egypt, but I'm not persuaded.

Did Moses really believe that God had sent him to rescue cadavers? He's saying, I'm going to go and see if there's anybody still alive. I'm going to go and see if the people are still alive.

Well, of course they're alive. If he's been sent to rescue them, they've got to be alive. One necessary condition for being rescued is to be alive. Because if you're dead, I'm afraid it's too late.

That in itself is a solemn truth. They're very much alive. And it's because they're alive that they need to be rescued. And yet, Moses to Jethro, I'm going to go to Egypt just to see if they're still alive.

If they're still alive, well, we'll see what we do then. So yes, he's going to obey. But there is, it would seem, still a great deal of reluctance in the manner of his obedience.

[35 : 42] I think that is a, an instructive thing or a warning for us. Reluctant and faithless obedience is a very, to put it mildly, a very unpleasant thing.

It's a very ugly thing. It's ugly to God when our obedience is forced and reluctant. And it's discouraging to others. If we are involved with others in serving God and with those with whom we serve, there is this reluctance, there is this sense that, well, there's no point, nothing's going to work, nobody's going to listen.

what's the point? How discouraging that is. When even it's just one person in a group of people who has that attitude. I'll go and see if any of them are still alive.

But the wonderful thing is that despite all this, despite all this, God responds patiently with Moses. He puts up and perseveres with Moses and indeed encourages Moses.

Moses. There in verse 19, now the Lord had said to Moses and Midian, now there is some debate there as to whether this is something that, as the NIV would suggest, that the Lord had already said to Moses or whether it's something that the Lord says to Moses at this point.

[37 : 03] Now the Lord said to Moses, go back to Egypt for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead. Yes, there are dead people in Egypt, but they're your enemies. The ones who wanted to kill you, they're dead. But my people who you are to rescue, they're very much alive.

So you just go and rescue them, for I will be with you. Well, despite all of the protests of Moses, God's purposes, and it will ever be so, are not frustrated.

We can just notice how the chapter ends in verse 31, and they believed. Indeed, we need go no further. They believed. When they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped.

Well, 1,500 years after the aged shepherd reluctantly responded to the call of God, another shepherd, the good shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, willingly and lovingly and lovingly obeyed the call of His Father, and His here I am, took Him all the way to Golgotha, all the way to Calvary, and death in the place of sinners.

And today, God continues to call His people by name. He continues to call us and to commission us that we would make known the good news of the saving work of Jesus to a lost and captive generation.

[38 : 39] And how will you respond? How will we obey? Let us pray.