
The Bush Was Blazing, yet It Was Not Consumed

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We've never met. But, you may have heard of me. I'm the angel that appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

You have probably seen the burning bush in the movies. They always make it seem more fantastic than it really was. The bush is blazing, yet it is not consumed.

That's what I want to talk to you about. If you get caught up in the magic, then you will miss the meaning.

I had known Moses since he was a child. He was smart, athletic and good looking. Everyone loved him. He was the best in everything that he did.

Pharaoh adored him. He often put him on his lap to play with him.

One day, the boy took the crown off of Pharaoh's head and put it on his own. This was not done, even by a child. Pharaoh's counselors called it high treason. The priests declared it a bad omen. All agreed that the child should be put to death.

I disguised myself as one of Pharaoh's advisors and suggested that they first put Moses to the test. I told them to set two plates before the boy, one piled high with gold and precious stones, the other with burning coals. If the boy reached for the gold and precious stones, then they could be sure that he was a threat. But, if he reached for the hot coals, then they could assume that he was simply attracted to shiny objects.

Of course, when the plates appeared, Moses went right for the gold. When I pushed his hand away, he instinctively grabbed a hot coal instead. He brought the coal to his mouth and it burned his tongue. Moses was not happy. He has stuttered ever since.

I knew Moses was different the day he left the palace to find out what was happening to his people.

He went out into the streets, the bazaars and the building sites. He was shocked by what he saw. The strong were carrying light burdens and the weak were straining under heavy loads. The young men were doing things better suited for the old and the old were doing things better suited for the young. Nobody seemed to care. They were just slaves.

But, he , he was a prince. Moses reorganized everything. He gave them all something to do that matched their skills.

He didn't stop there, of course. He made sure that they got enough water and food, that they had clean places to live and work, and that they were allowed to practice their religious rituals.

The more he did for them, the more he began to feel like he really was one of them. Their pain became his pain. When he saw that Egyptian overseer whipping one of the Israelites, he felt like the lashes were striking his own back. He had put an end to the Egyptian before he even knew what he was doing.

But, one thing continued to bother him. He couldn't understand why the Israelites kept turning on each other. As soon as they got any power, they acted just like their enemies. He couldn't understand why the slaves chosen for special privileges by the overseers weren't any better than the overseers themselves.

It all came to a head the day the Israelite challenged him. He rounded the corner just as a fight was breaking out. As one of the Israelites was about to hit the other, Moses shouted at him. "What are you doing? He is your brother."

He was not prepared for the reply. "Save your breath. Are you going to kill us too?"

This was more than he could take. If they knew that he had killed the Egyptian, then it could only be because he had been betrayed by the man that he had saved. And, if the rumors had already started, it wouldn't be long before Pharaoh heard them.

He knew that he could deal with Pharaoh. He was still the favorite son. But, he couldn't deal with betrayal. He couldn't get over the feeling that his own people had turned on him.

He left and never went back. He fled into the desert and didn't stop until he got to Midian. He became a shepherd there and started a family. They thought he was an Egyptian and he didn't correct their mistake.

It seemed like such a long time had passed. All these years, he had been an alien living in a foreign land - a stranger to himself and a stranger to his people. When I looked into his face that day, I didn't see much life in it. He was in such despair that he didn't even know that he was in despair.

I wasn't sure he would get it. But, the Lord said he would.

The bush was blazing, yet it was not being consumed.

The Lord said that he needed Moses to go back. The Lord thought that only Moses could deal effectively with Pharaoh. Only Moses could free the others and lead them to safety.

Moses argued with the Lord, of course. They always do. I can hear him now. Moses reminded the Lord of his stutter, of his family, of others who could do the job, and, finally, of the impossibility of the job itself. But, in the end, he accepted the challenge. He agreed to be the one.

Moses was right in many ways. The Lord could have chosen another. There were others more eloquent than Moses. And, they didn't carry some of his baggage.

They really might have been able to do a better job of convincing the people to leave Egypt. They might have been able to paint a more appealing picture of the Promised Land. And, they probably could have figured out how to survive in the wilderness.

But, that's wasn't the point. The Lord knew that Moses had learned that he existed apart from his people. He wouldn't let them tell him who he was. He would feel the pain of the people, but he would not let it become his pain again. He would see their betrayal, but he would not give up on them again. He would be angered by their ungratefulness, but he would not become a stranger to them again.

The Lord knew that Moses would understand why the bush was blazing, yet it was not being consumed.

It all happened just the way the Lord said it would. When Pharaoh's chariots come after them, they blamed Moses for their fear. When they couldn't find enough food to eat, they blamed Moses for their hunger. When they couldn't find enough water to drink, they blamed Moses for their thirst.

And, when they realized that the Lord favored Moses, they became jealous of him.

Moses, the one drawn from the water.

I remember the moment that his face began to change. I could see the beginnings of life in it. I could see that he was beginning to remember all of the things that others had done for him.

I remember thinking that he would refuse to turn the Nile into a river of blood when the Lord asked him. He would not turn on the river that had saved his life. I knew I'd have to get Aaron to do that.

I remember thinking that he would refuse to fight the Midians when the Lord asked him. He would not stand against those who had given him shelter. I knew I'd have to get Joshua to do that.

Then, I remember the moment that I knew he understood. The old fire had returned to his eyes.

His passion was blazing again, yet, this time, I knew that he would not be consumed.

Note: The story of the test arranged by an angel and the idea that Moses felt betrayed by the Israelites was taken from Elie Wiesel's essay, "Moses: Portrait of a Leader" which is published in a collection of Biblical Portraits and Legends titled Messengers of God (New York: Touchstone Publishing, 1976).

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