

THE BURNING BUSH

Our God is infinite and eternal. He knows all of the future as well as the past. Not only does He comprehend the beginning and end of everything, the Bible teaches us that He is the beginning and end. God exists beyond and above what we know as "time." Time is simply a part of His creation. Since we are finite beings and are therefore limited by "time," this concept of the Eternal One existing outside of time may be difficult for us to fathom. Nevertheless it is true. God simply "is." And His existence transcends both time and space.

As a consequence of this, nothing which God does is accidental. His work has not been done and is not being done on the spur of the moment, according to some sudden idea which enters His mind. Instead everything which God is doing has been planned "long ago" from a human standpoint. All His activities are directed toward accomplishing the objectives which He determined from the beginning. Nothing which has transpired, either to hinder His purposes or to further them has been a surprise to Him. Every circumstance has been foreknown, and God in His infinite wisdom has planned a way to accomplish His will through it.

With this in mind, let us take a further look together at the life of a very special man of God. No doubt, long before he was born, Moses was chosen by God as a vessel to accomplish a great and mighty work for His name. He was not selected hastily just because he happened to be in the right place at the right time, rather he was a part of an unfathomable, eternal design. Not only did the Almighty foreknow and choose Moses, but He also planned a way to prepare him for his future assignment. Shortly after his birth (I trust that you all have read the story) Moses was taken from his hiding place in the river, right into the household of Pharaoh. There he received education and training about the ways and customs of the royal court (Acts 7:22). All this was part of God's design to prepare Moses for the work which lay ahead.

I suppose it is theoretically possible for some shepherd who has spent his entire life in the desert to walk into Pharaoh's presence and deal with him in the way in which Moses did. But Moses was not just an ordinary shepherd. He was a man prepared by God for an extraordinary task. In preparation for his calling, our Lord arranged a very unusual education. Consequently, when the time came he was qualified to move with confidence in the courts of Pharaoh among the mighty of the land and carry out the assignment of the Most High.

Not only was Moses prepared by God, He was also called by God to the work for which he was predestined. We do not know exactly when in his life Moses began to understand this calling, but it is clear that by the age of 40, he knew something about it. It is probable that he had not yet begun to suspect the fulness of God's plan, but he did

seem to comprehend that he had been chosen by the Lord to deliver His people. In Acts 7:25 we read: "For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand." Evidently, because he was aware of this fact he erroneously presumed that they too had realized it. However, they did not. It was not yet God's time and all His work of preparation had not yet been finished.

Since Moses' comprehension of God's way was incomplete, his behavior reflected this deficiency. He must have looked with natural eyes at the situation. To see his own brethren so abused and in bondage probably stirred many passionate feelings within him. Their continual, severe, oppression must have had a great impact upon him. He must have been consumed with the idea of getting on with the job which God had given him to do. The position of power and authority to which he had come, his own strength and wisdom, the innate leadership abilities which he possessed—all of these things convinced him that he could and should begin to take some steps to carry out the calling of God. So when the opportunity presented itself he took it, killing the single Egyptian and hiding him in the sand.

What a mighty deliverance he accomplished! One oppressor dead and one Israelite temporarily delivered. With all his training and natural talents, this was all he could do. Moses was undoubtedly burning inside with the desire to see God's people free. He was trying his best to do the work that he had been called to do. Yet the results were so pitiful. Not only were the Lord's people not delivered, not only did they not understand what he was trying to do, but he himself had to flee for his life into the wilderness. Even though he was called by God to do this work, what he could produce with his own energy was only failure.

The next 40 years of Moses' life were spent tending sheep. Although he could not have known it, this also was a time of God's preparation. After so long a time, he had given up the idea of executing any kind of deliverance. The burning desire he once possessed to save his own people was now just a faint memory. He had grown older and wiser. The natural strength which once surged through his being had abated and the gifts and talents which he had acquired in Egypt had not been used in years. This too was God's doing. It was an essential part of the making of a servant of the Most High. It was the breaking down of that which was natural in Moses—the bringing down into the dust of his human strength and abilities—so that God could be the One that was manifested through him. As far as Moses could see, he was finished, but in God's eyes, it was just the beginning.

When Moses was about 80 years of age, God appeared to him in a most unusual way. As he was going about with his sheep, he noticed a bush which was burning. But there was something strange about the fire in this bush. Although it burned intensely, the bush was not consumed. There was nothing natural about this fire. It was not using any of the earthly elements of the bush. It is quite possible that the leaves of the bush remained green. This fire was fueled by something supernatural. It was the fire of God!

As Moses turned aside to see this wonder, a voice spoke to him. The Voice sternly informed him that this heavenly fire had made this place holy and that there was no room for spectators. As a reaction to this, Moses hid his face. The fear of God was upon him and he could not even satisfy his normal curiosity. Something had been broken within him and he was no longer able or willing to act in a natural, human way. Moses had become "very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3).

This was the manner in which the Most High God finalized His calling upon Moses' life—through the burning bush. Through it he received the most important

revelation. He indeed was to burn for God, but not with his own energy. He was to have a great zeal for the liberation of God's people, yet a zeal which was not his own. He was to execute a great deliverance, but it was not to be one which he engineered. God was going to use him in a way no human being had ever been used before, however it was not going to be his doing at all but the heavenly fire working through him.

A NECESSARY PREREQUISITE

Here is an essential truth about genuine spiritual authority. Before anyone can be greatly used by God to transmit his authority, they must be broken. They must first have had a supernatural work done to their natural being so that they are no longer whole. They must be broken by God. When this work is finished, they are no longer able to use their natural talents and abilities to serve God. They are no longer seeking to devise a deliverance for His people. Their own leadership capabilities have failed them and so unless Someone higher moves through them, they will not move at all. Once a child of God reaches this position, he is then ready for great service. It is then that such a person can be really useful to God. When their trust in their own gifts, personality, knowledge and abilities is thoroughly and completely ended, then, and only then are they qualified to be used in a mighty way to manifest true spiritual authority.

Not only the man Moses had to undergo this experience, but everyone who has ever been used by God has also known His breaking hand in their life. Take just a moment and consider the history of some other biblical figures carefully. Read through the story of Joseph and see how much suffering he had to endure before he was ready for great leadership. Remember Abraham who received such tremendous promises. When they did not come to pass, he and Sara contrived to fulfill God's word by their own strength. The disaster of this decision is still with us today. But after many years of God's dealings with him, when he and his wife were way beyond any of their own abilities, they saw the power of God revealed.

Review the history of Jacob, the "supplanter," the schemer, the one who was always figuring out a way to come out on top. He was even willing to wrestle with the angel until God touched his thigh. The strongest part of his body was supernaturally put out of joint and he could no longer be the same. After this he could not walk the way he used to. Something was permanently changed. It was then that his name was changed from Jacob, "supplanter," to "Israel," the "prince of God."

Even David the king was not a man who came to power suddenly, but was prepared for years by God while tending the sheep and later during his experiences with Saul. Afterward he was very useful to God in subduing His enemies. Imagine the sorrow and breaking which Naomi and Ruth endured before they saw victory manifested for them. These and many others all had to pass through the "burning bush" experience. It was necessary for them to be transformed from natural men and women to spiritual ones through having their own strength broken by God.

THE NEW COVENANT EXPERIENCE

Not only is this true in the Old Testament, but in the New Covenant as well. In fact, I believe that this experience may be even more important for those who have been born of God than it was for them. All of these things which were written about them were really written for our sake so that we could receive Divine instruction from

them (Rm 15:4).

Perhaps Paul the apostle provides us with the best New Testament example of such Divine dealings. Before his conversion he was undoubtedly extremely strong in himself. He was a "Pharisee of the Pharisees," an educated, well-bred Jewish male who was "exceedingly zealous" for the things of God. In his own burning efforts to serve Jehovah, he even resorted to persecuting the Church. Then one day he had an encounter with the Light on the road. This experience brought him low—all the way to the ground. Soon afterwards we find Saul in the synagogues disputing with the religious leaders and preaching the good news which he had received. But even this was only the beginning. God wanted something much more from this man than just the winning of a few arguments about religion. He had in mind a far greater ministry.

Shortly after his conversion, Paul almost disappears from the scriptural record. After his initial experience with Christ, nothing much is heard about him until Barnabas goes to Tarsus to look for him. Where has he been? What has he been doing? Evidently he has been doing nothing of any great consequence. But God has been doing something in him. During this period, he spent some years in Arabia (Gal 1:17), perhaps in the wilderness. We do not really know how long he was there or what he experienced. We only know that when he reemerges upon the church scene, he is not the same man. He is no longer full of his own zeal and energy but is now one who is useful to God to minister Himself to His people. Now Paul is heard saying things like: "we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (II Cor 1:9), and "for when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Cor 12:10).

This strong "Saul" man has become Paul and this defines the character of his ministry from then on. He portrays his posture in one assembly by saying: "I was with you in weakness, and in fear" (I Cor 2:3). Not that Paul's ministry was weak, certainly it was not, yet he felt weak in himself. He no longer trusted in his own strength and zeal to accomplish the will of God. The potency of his own life had been broken. He now knew that what he had and what he was as a human being was only useful when it was motivated with the strength of God. Thus, this once self-sufficient man, whose sufficiency was transformed to that of Someone greater, became perhaps the most fruitful Christian of all time. He became a vessel of Divine power, revelation and authority. Not only did he minister Christ to many in his day, but even now his ministry is still bearing fruit through the pages of the New Testament.

A PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Today in the Christian church there is a very common problem. Young men and women are born again, gifted, called by God and anointed for the work of the ministry. Their gifts are real. Their calling is genuine. But the preparation work of God in their lives is not complete. For reasons which we will be examining shortly, such talented brethren are often thrust into positions of authority for which they are not fully prepared. Since they are not spiritually qualified, they have no alternative but to function as mere men. Such earthly authority introduced into the church of God interrupts the flow of Divine authority which is essential to the proper functioning of the body and pollutes the work of God. It brings in a natural, human element which cannot produce anything spiritual and only becomes a hindrance .

Please do not misunderstand. Young believers can exhibit some degree of spiritual authority. As long as they function within the sphere of ministry which the Holy Spirit opens for them, there is no difficulty. This sphere is of course small at the

beginning and grows as their ability and sensitivity to God increases. However as they begin to function in the body of Christ, they often arrive at a position where they begin to attempt to exercise authority which is far beyond their capacity and consequently fall into the snare of the devil (I Tim 3:7).

This problem seems to develop in two ways. The first scenario goes something like this: These new converts are usually very zealous and have lots of energy to expend on the things of God. The other brethren cannot help but notice the gifts, anointing and leadership capabilities operating in these people. As we have been seeing from the previous chapters, natural men often desire an earthly authority, a "king." They like someone else to fight the battles, take care of the problems, discover the leading of God and other such things. So when they see those who are energetic, those whom God is using and who have real spiritual gifts, they often push them forward in the church. They take them and make them into their pastors, elders and so forth. All too frequently, they elevate them way beyond their true spiritual capacity and put them into the "positions" of authority in the church about which we have spoken before.

Of course these recent converts do not have the wisdom and maturity to avoid this pitfall. They sincerely assume that the others who are impelling them must know the right way. Since they are eager, as Moses was, to serve God and do His will, they allow men to put them in these positions. But this is a serious mistake. It is impossible for such individuals to function properly, according to the Spirit. They simply do not have the Divine preparation. Their spiritual sensitivity to God and their mistrust in their own abilities has not yet been fully established. This then leaves them with no option but to operate naturally, relying on their own capabilities. It is this kind of injection of earthly authority which so quickly pollutes the church.

If such individuals have a strong personality and lots of energy they may appear to succeed in what they are doing, at least for a while. Others may acclaim their accomplishments. Their influence may expand and their "ministry" grow quite rapidly. Soon they may even be leading some large religious organization and attracting many new members. However, our God deeply understands the true spiritual substance of all our works. Anything which has been done by our own energy and effort is rejected by Him. Such earthly things will be burned up at the judgment seat of Christ. "Wood, hay and stubble" cannot last on that day (I Cor 3:12). Nothing natural will survive.

It is also possible that God will have mercy upon these young recruits and allow their work to fail and fall apart. He does this lovingly so that they will not become entangled completely in their error. He yearns for them to come to a place of brokenness before Him. However, many of these individuals do not understand such workings or perceive the hand of God in their defeats. They just do not see how God could "fail" them when they were working so hard for Him. Consequently they become bitter and disillusioned. Their faith is shipwrecked. For many such believers, what they see other Christians doing all around them is their only guide. According to this standard they have not succeeded and they often believe that God has let them down. It seems difficult for some to move beyond this understanding. They either give up serving the Lord entirely or move on to other ever increasingly human methods to achieve the results which they are taught to expect.

The second reason that young believers often arrive in positions of authority (a reason which often operates along with the one mentioned before) is that they themselves seek it. These are usually people who are naturally strong and even before their conversion were accustomed to trusting in their own abilities. So when they come

to the church, God has not yet had time to change this situation. Since they are gifted, ambitious and even called by God, these men and women naturally rise to the top in any situation. Unless there are older, mature believers present who have experienced the breaking hand of God in their lives, to counsel and direct such young ones, the taking of Divine authority into their own hands is almost inevitable. These Christians, through natural strength, rise beyond their sphere spiritually and become leaders. This not only becomes a serious hindrance in the church, but, in the course of time, will also have a severely negative impact upon the person who is so elevated.

Some men enjoy exercising authority over others. It is a real boost to their ego to think that they can control large numbers of people. After they become converted and filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to see God using them in many, perhaps miraculous ways. It suddenly becomes very easy for them to impress people and attract followers. Their spiritual gifts just become the icing on the cake of their human disposition and abilities. Unless this kind of natural personality is humbled and subdued by God, these people will automatically grab for as much power as they can.

The church today is full of such leaders. Some strive to see how many people they can influence. They brag to anyone who will listen about how many "churches" are "under" their ministry, about how many "home groups" they have or how many new members they have recruited. Often such individuals find ways to drive out of their churches others who are being raised up by God or anyone else who appears to be a threat to their authority. Since their authority has a human basis, it can only be defended by human means. Contention, pride, jealousy and many other things are evidenced in such situations. This kind of "authority" is repugnant to anyone who has real spiritual eyes. These believers have fallen into the snare of the devil.

The exercise of authority in Christ's Church is a very profound thing. It is not something which should be taken lightly. We are not dealing here with some kind of earthly organization or business. Just because someone has "leadership ability" in the world does not at all qualify them to do anything in the church. How we need to approach this subject with Godly fear! How much we men need to repent of substituting our own authority for God's! What we are supposed to be building here is something eternal, something of heavenly substance. We must take this responsibility very seriously and approach the exercise of authority with trembling lest we corrupt the work of Christ. The misuse and misunderstanding of God's authority is one of the primary reasons that the Church as a whole is in such a low spiritual state and has not fulfilled her commission toward the world.

GOD'S SERVANTS REQUIRE PREPARATION

During Jesus' earthly ministry, He taught His disciples many things. One of His methods for teaching was to give them pictures or examples. On one occasion, the twelve noticed that the people to whom Jesus was ministering were getting hungry. The day was almost gone and they had nothing to eat. Jesus took this opportunity to show them something profound. His response to the problem was to tell the disciples that they should meet this need. "But," they protested, "we have only a little food (five loaves and two fish), how can we do anything with that?" Jesus was asking them to do an enormous task, and they were able to recognize that, according to their natural ability, it was impossible. Yet He took what they had into His hands and broke it. Crunch, crunch, crumble, I can imagine their astonishment. When He was finished, there was more than enough for everyone.

This then is how God works with His followers. His instruction is for us to minister Himself to the multitudes. But what we have naturally is not sufficient for the job. Even with our God-given abilities we will be able to minister to only a very few people at the beginning. Our few loaves and fish can never meet the larger need until they have been broken in the hands of the Savior. God must do a breaking work in our lives. If we are to be mightily used, a vessel for supernatural authority, there is no other way. The natural strength must be crushed and our wholeness fractured beyond repair. Then, and only then are we qualified to be used by God in any larger way.

Does this sound harsh? Does it seem difficult? It is! None of the Lord's true servants ever had an "easy time of it." Dying is never enjoyable, but it is the only way. The elimination of our natural strength is the only possibility. If we are not profoundly touched in this fashion, even when we are trying our best to do the right thing, the flesh will express itself. Often we are completely unaware when this happens. Our spiritual immaturity blinds us to how our attitudes and actions appear to others and to the spiritual world. We often have no concept of the depths of our own self-strength or of the evil that lurks within us. Consequently, we do not have any idea of how badly we need to be broken by the hand of God. But our Master knows us intimately and He sees clearly the areas of our lives which need alteration. For this the "self" life must die. While it remains alive, it will always be manifested and defile the work of God.

All those who would be greatly used by God will pass through some dark, difficult, painful times. It is not that Jesus is angry with us or that we have sinned against Him in some way. No, these experiences are for those who are especially loved by Him. These are hours of trial for those who are chosen to be vessels of His power and authority. No doubt such individuals will encounter many times and situations where they think that they just cannot go on. They may believe that they cannot bear the difficulty and pain which they are experiencing for another minute. They can find no way out. Yet somehow, God grants them just enough grace to survive. During each hour of darkness and turmoil, He is there to see them through. All along they are expecting His deliverance from their situation, not realizing that Jesus is delivering them from themselves through the situation. In fact, He has probably allowed these circumstances to bring them to just such a place so that He can accomplish His breaking work within them.

Let us not think at such times that God has forsaken us. Just the opposite is true. These experiences really are the manifestation of Divine love. He is preparing His servants so that they will be infinitely useful to Him. There is simply no other way. If the natural life persists, it will always be a hindrance and problem. Paul the apostle seems to be describing just such an hour of trial when he writes: "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (II Cor 4:8-11). The fact that he too experienced such things should be a source of great comfort to us.

Dear friends, please realize that this is not a work which you can do to yourself. The breaking of the natural strength is not something which the natural man can do. Only God can do this work within a person and He will do it in His way and in His time. All we can do is to yield ourselves to Him completely, holding nothing back and give Him permission to do whatever He wants to in our lives.

The breaking experience takes time. There is no substitute for years of

preparation in the hands of the Potter. However, this time period is not the same for everyone. With some, God may do this work gradually over a period of years and so with these ones, the exercise of Divine authority will also expand slowly. With others, the Master may see fit to appoint a special time in their experience where He does a dramatic breaking work. When this takes place, everyone around will notice a tremendously rapid change in the character and personality of this person. Probably soon after this, God will begin to use them in a much more mighty way. But however He works in our lives, it is His to choose and do. Our part is simply to be submissive and obedient to Him.

These then are the qualifications for transmitting Supernatural authority: to be called, anointed and prepared by God. None of these items can be passed over. There is no doubt that God can and does want to use those gifts which He has given us and also, to some extent, the natural abilities with which He has equipped us. However, none of these things can be of very much use to Him until our strength is exhausted and He is in complete control. Some of the things which we might consider to be our very strongest assets are actually of the least use to Him because of the human strength which still lies within them. It is most often in the areas where we are weak that His power can flow. While you remain "whole" you can be of little use to God.