

Buzz King  
[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)  
BuzzKing.com  
303 437 7419

**Exodus 3:1–8, New Living Translation.**

*One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn't burn up. <sup>3</sup> "This is amazing," Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it."*

*<sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"*

*"Here I am!" Moses replied.*

*<sup>5</sup> "Do not come any closer," the LORD warned. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. <sup>6</sup> I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.*

*<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD told him, "I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey.*

**Joy comes in the morning.**

We've talked before about numerology in the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. One number that appears frequently is 40. Remember that Jesus, just before he begins his active ministry, spends forty days and nights in the desert, being tempted by Satan. He is thirsty and hungry, but first, he must withstand this period of intense testing. He casts the devil aside, and that period

of forty days ends with this line: <sup>11</sup> *Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.* Only then was Jesus ready to begin his ministry. The number 40 is often used in the Bible to represent the process of overcoming worldly attractions in the search for true faith, of going through an intense period of spiritual trial. This concept is particularly important in the life of Moses. Moses, in Scripture, is said to live to be 120, with his life poetically broken into three periods of forty years: the last period of forty is the time spent in the desert, waiting for a new generation of Israelites to be born and to come of age, so that no one who came before and could have doubted God's trustworthiness would be alive when they entered the Promised land. The first period of forty years in Moses' life covers the time during which he is born, is adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, and is forced to witness his people being brutalized as slaves. When he is 40 years old, Moses sees an Egyptian beating one of his own people, a Hebrew, and Moses kills the Egyptian. Word gets out that it was Moses who did this; he flees to a place called Midian. During the last forty, he is in the desert, with God helping him lead his people to freedom. During the first forty, he learns that he is a Hebrew, a person who would later be called an Israelite, and he learns about the lives of God's People under the thumb of the Pharaoh. During the middle forty years, between the ages of 40 and 80, he lives in exile in Midian; he marries and has children. At the end of

this period, God comes to him in a bizarre fashion, in a burning bush that miraculously is not consumed by the fire. This bush represents the forces of evil attempting to destroy the people of God. They survive because God is more powerful than Satan. The Hebrews, although they are living under intense threat, are not destroyed, just like a bush that refuses to be burned. Here is how Moses ends that second 40-year period of testing his faith:

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Moses is now 80 years old and has just spent 40 years in waiting, separated from his people, working as a lowly shepherd for his wife's father. He is tending sheep when he encounters the burning bush. We see that God only comes to Moses after Moses spends a long period living a humble life. God has now prepared him for an incredible mission, where he will face an almost unbelievable challenge: keeping his people alive in the desert for 40 years. This is what happens next:

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*God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.*

*<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey.*

God has decided that it’s time. Two extended periods of waiting - of testing - have passed. God tells Moses that God has heard the cries of his people, living under oppression, and now it is time for them to be rescued. They will live on their own land for the first time in their history. It will be the land of milk and honey.

One of the central themes of the life of Moses, of the story of the Chosen People, is that of waiting until God decides that it is time. That same theme is reflected in multiple places in the New Testament. Here is something from Paul’s letter to the believers in Rome. I have abbreviated it:

*<sup>18</sup> Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*

*<sup>19</sup> For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. <sup>20</sup> Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, <sup>21</sup> the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. We have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us.*

*<sup>24</sup> We were given this hope when we were saved.*

*<sup>26</sup>And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*

Paul is saying whatever we suffer in life is nothing compared to what we will receive in eternity, when we are free from death. We can be confident of our futures because on the day we were saved, when we first truly felt the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, we knew at that moment that someday, we would be with God forever. In the meantime, the Holy Spirit will keep us strong and help us support our fellow believers. But there's more than just the promise of eternal life. There is something we gain in this life on this planet by putting our earthly suffering in context with the full promise of being a follower of Christ:

*<sup>35</sup>Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? <sup>37</sup>No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. <sup>38</sup>And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. <sup>39</sup>No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul says that we know that we are connected to God. Nothing that happens on this Earth or in all of creation can separate us from God's love. That's the big benefit we have in being believers, and we have it despite whatever happens in life.

But the lesson of Moses is that we can't be impatient with God. This promise that we'll always have God's love and protection, that we will never be separated

from God - it's a two-way commitment. God commits to us – and we must commit to God, without limit. Moses was eighty before he set off on his mission for God. He had gone through two periods of extended trial. Now, we take the dying age of Moses as something poetic, symbolic. His life is broken into three perfect periods of trial. Three periods of testing. Here is how that last, that third, period ends:

*<sup>4</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have now allowed you to see it with your own eyes, but you will not enter the land."*

*<sup>5</sup> So Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, just as the LORD had said. <sup>6</sup> The LORD buried him in a valley near Beth-peor in Moab, but to this day no one knows the exact place. <sup>7</sup> Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyesight was clear, and he was as strong as ever.*

We are told that when he dies, at the age of 120, his eyesight is clear. He is as strong as he was as a young man. He has survived the last period of trial. He will not enter the Promised Land. To us, it seems a gigantic disappointment. He spent 40 years as a slave, then 40 years exiled as a shepherd working for his father-in-law, then 40 years wandering in the desert, preparing a new generation to enter the Promised Land. That's what he does at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He reiterates for the new generation - those born in the desert - the promises of God, their covenant with God, and the laws handed by God to Moses on the Mountain. He tells them that they must be careful to never become corrupt, to never separate themselves from God. Moses tells his people that they are not to adopt the worldly, multi-god

practices of the people of Canaan. He predicts the eventual arrival of a prophet who will be like him, like Moses; this is, of course, Jesus. In sum, Moses mostly spends his life working for God, not for himself. In the end, he has nothing. He dies in the desert, without entering the land that God is giving his people as part of the Mosaic Covenant. It seems hugely ironic. But surely, none of us see Moses as a failure, as having suffered with no benefit. We would see ourselves as amazingly gifted by God if we were to contribute to humanity - to carrying out the will of God - the way that Moses did. But still, Moses must have been disappointed.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is quoted as saying:

*<sup>16</sup> "In a little while you won't see me anymore. But a little while after that, you will see me again."*

*<sup>17</sup> Some of the disciples asked each other, "What does he mean when he says, 'In a little while you won't see me, but then you will see me,' and 'I am going to the Father'?" <sup>18</sup> And what does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand."*

*<sup>19</sup> Jesus realized they wanted to ask him about it, so he said, "Are you asking yourselves what I meant? I said in a little while you won't see me, but a little while after that you will see me again. <sup>20</sup> I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn over what is going to happen to me, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. <sup>21</sup> It will be like a woman suffering the pains of labor. When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world. <sup>22</sup> So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy. I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy."*

Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death. They don't understand what he means when he says that he's going away "to the father". They are going to be without

him. They will miss him deeply. They will feel abandoned. They need to know that the followers of Jesus will be persecuted. However, he tells them, their suffering will be like that of a woman in labor. When the child is born – that is, after their faith has been tested and they remain faithful – they will be filled with joy. And, while he is gone and they are on their own to spread the Word to the world, they are to remember that if they ask God the Father for help, and if they ask in Jesus' name, God will answer them. We are the new disciples of Christ. Jesus' words are meant as much for us as for the people who walked alongside him in life. We always have God with us. But God will indeed allow bad things to happen to us, just as God allowed them to happen to the very first followers of Christ. However, God will answer when we call. Like God did with Moses, we will have to wait for God to decide it's time – and it could be a long time. And we will have to accept whatever God sees as the answer to our prayer, to whatever testing we must undergo.

God does answer. Psalm 30 is attributed to King David. In it, the psalmist refuses to allow his enemies to triumph over him. He refuses to be broken by the loss of his health. This is what he says: *Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.* No matter what happens in life, there is always a morning that brings joy. We just have to let God choose the time and the nature of our joy.

What do we do while we wait for that morning that brings joy? Paul - the Great Evangelist to the Gentiles - tells us near the end of his most important letter, Romans: <sup>13</sup> *I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.* Paul has just told the believers in Rome that their job is not to be superior to others, not to beat down their enemies and to fill their lives with earthly satisfaction. Rather, they – and we - are to go out into the world with the single goal of sharing the Word of Christ and the grace of God with other people. He ends by telling us that our source of joy and peace will come from our trust in God. Our hope for the future will come through the power of the Holy Spirit. We're not to look for a life that will make us happy all the time in some earthly fashion. We're to look instead for a life that is filled with faith. If that is our goal, then we will achieve all we could ever ask for. And no matter what else happens, we will find joy. We don't wait for death and an eternal future with God. We make our joy by allowing God to put us through periods of intense spiritual trial, and then emerging with our faith strengthened. Please pray with me.

*God, life is scary. We never know what will happen. Terrible things that we would never expect will indeed come about. It's easy to live with great sadness when something causes us to experience intense pain or deep sorrow or blinding*

*fear. Help us make our lives joyful simply through our faith in you. And let us trust you to choose the time and the fashion for us to see joy. Amen.*