

EXODUS

Chapter 4

Moses Given Powerful Signs

Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” 2 The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” 3 And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. 4 But the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand — 5 “that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” 6 Again, the LORD said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. 7 Then God said, “Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. 8 “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. 9 If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.” 10 But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” 11 Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” 13 But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” 14 Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. 16 He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. 17 And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.”

4:1 *they will not believe me.* Moses’ third objection contradicts God’s statement that Israel “will listen to your voice” (3:18). (TLSB)

Moses’ third expression of reluctance (in spite of God’s assurance in 3:18). (CSB)

4:2 *staff.* Probably a shepherd’s crook. (CSB)

Shepherd’s staff or rod; it became the symbol of God’s power (7:15). (TLSB)

4:3 *serpent.* Throughout much of Egypt’s history the pharaoh wore a cobra made of metal on the front of his headdress as a symbol of his sovereignty. (CSB)

Shepherd’s staff or rod; it became the symbol of God’s power (7:15). (TLSB)

4:4 A test of faith. It is dangerous to catch a serpent by the tail. (TLSB)

4:5 *that they may believe.* Sign was to convince the people that God had appeared to Moses but also to convince Moses of God’s power. (TLSB)

4:8 *If they will not believe.* “If” anticipates the future unbelief and rebellion Israel would express for generations. Miracles do not necessarily lead to faith (Jn 12:37; 1Co 1:22–23). (TLSB)

sign. A supernatural event or phenomenon designed to demonstrate authority, provide assurance (see Jos 2:12–13), bear testimony (see Isa 19:19–20), give warning (see Nu 17:10) or encourage faith. (CSB)

4:9 Moses could not perform the third sign in the arid wilderness, but it prefigured the first plague. (TLSB)

4:10 Moses’ fourth expression of reluctance. (CSB)

I am not eloquent. Not in the sense of a speech impediment (see Ac 7:22). He complained, instead, of not being eloquent or quick-witted enough to respond to the pharaoh (see 6:12). Cf. the description of Paul in 2Co 10:10. (CSB)

Moses still resisted God’s call with a fourth objection, claiming to have a “heavy” (Hbr *kabed*) mouth and tongue. Perhaps he had a speech impediment. Ironically, the same Hbr root word can be used for “glory” and “honor,” which Moses would later receive. (TLSB)

4:11 Rhetorical questions, hinting at the Lord’s irritation with Moses. (TLSB)

mouth ... mute ... deaf ... seeing ... blind? God takes responsibility for all our abilities, which He may use for His purposes. (TLSB)

4:12 *I will be with your mouth.* I AM would speak through Moses, making him a prophet. (TLSB)

4:13 *send someone else.* Moses’ last objection. He did not want to go back to Egypt, but he humbly left the decision to the Lord. (TLSB)

Moses’ fifth and final expression of reluctance. (CSB)

4:14 *the LORD’s anger was kindled.* Although the Lord is “slow to anger” (34:6), he does not withhold his anger or punishment from his disobedient children forever (see 34:7). (CSB)

When God’s anger flared against a person, usually punishment followed (Dt 29:27); yet here God provided Moses with a helper. (TLSB)

Levite. Under Aaron’s leadership Israel’s priesthood would come from the tribe of Levi. (CSB)

First mention of Aaron, whom the Lord commanded to meet Moses (v 27). Aaron was three years older, and so would likely have known about his brother. (TLSB)

4:15 Promise similar to v 12 but now includes the mouth of Aaron. This made Aaron a prophet. (TLSB)

4:16 *you shall be as God to him.* Human beings were sometimes called “gods” in the sense that they were mighty leaders (Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34). Moses, not Aaron, remained the divine instrument through whom God spoke. (TLSB)

4:1–17 Moses resists the Lord’s call to lead Israel out of Egypt because of his focus on his own shortcomings and the doubts of his people. Moses may not be the best speaker, but that does not matter because he will be speaking God’s Word (v 12). Like Moses, we Christians have been called to speak God’s Word. This is an important assignment because it is through the Word that God “works in people’s

hearts true repentance, knowledge of sins, and true faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ. By this means, and in no other way ..., God desires to call people to eternal salvation" (FC SD II 50). • Lord, bless my mouth that I may speak Your Word clearly and with sincerity. Amen. (TLSB)

Moses Returns to Egypt

18 Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." 19 And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." 20 So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. 21 And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" 24 At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. 25 Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" 26 So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision. 27 The LORD said to Aaron, "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. 28 And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. 29 Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. 30 Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. 31 And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

4:18 *Please let me go.* Moses showed his willingness to obey God by requesting Jethro's permission to leave. (TLSB)

Go in peace. Jethro blessed Moses. (TLSB)

4:19 *all the men ... are dead.* Including Thutmose III. (CSB)

4:20 *sons.* Gershom (see 2:22) and Eliezer. The latter, though unmentioned by name until 18:4, had already been born. (CSB)

4:21 *I will harden his heart.* Nine times in Exodus the hardening of the pharaoh's heart is ascribed to God; another nine times the pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart (7:13–14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34–35). The pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening in each of the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague did God confirm the pharaoh's willful action (see 9:12), as he had told Moses he would do (see similarly Ro 1:24–28). (CSB)

The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart only after the sixth plague. Prior to that, Pharaoh hardened his own heart against the Lord and continued to do so. God's action was a judgment against Pharaoh's sin. (TLSB)

4:22 *firstborn son.* A figure of speech indicating Israel's special relationship with God (see Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1). (CSB)

God makes Himself the Father of the nation, attesting to the intimate Father-son relationship God had with Israel (cf Mt 2:15). See note, Hos 11:1. The firstborn had special rights of inheritance. (TLSB)

Lit, “my son, my firstborn is Israel.” Hbr for “firstborn” is masculine. (TLSB)

4:23 *kill your firstborn son.* Anticipates the tenth plague (see 11:5; 12:12). (CSB)

Pharaoh could save his firstborn son only if he freed the Lord’s firstborn son (Israel; v 22). Pharaoh’s dynasty would lose its heir. This ultimatum was not delivered immediately but was delayed until ch 11. (TLSB)

4:24 *lodging place.* Perhaps near water, where travelers could spend the night. (CSB)

A night stop for Moses’ family traveling to Egypt. Oases may have had shelters because of frequent visitors. (TLSB)

The LORD... sought to put him to death. Evidently because Moses had failed to circumcise his son (see Ge 17:9–14). (CSB)

This episode is difficult to understand. The Lord may have sought Moses’ death or the death of his uncircumcised son. The story implies that Moses should have circumcised his son before leaving for Egypt. (TLSB)

4:25 *Zipporah ... cut off her son’s foreskin.* Sensing that divine displeasure had threatened Moses’ life, she quickly performed the circumcision on their young son. (CSB)

They had two sons (18:3–4). Apparently, one was not circumcised but the other had been. By this time, the sons may have been grown men. Tertullian: “God, foreseeing that He was about to give this circumcision to the people of Israel for ‘a sign,’ not for salvation, urges the circumcision of the son of Moses, their future leader, for this reason; that ... the people should not despise [circumcision]” (*ANF* 3:153–54). (TLSB)

flint. Continued to be used for circumcision long after metal was introduced, probably because flint knives were sharper than the metal instruments available and thus more efficient for the surgical procedure. (CSB)

feet. Probably a euphemism for “genitals,” as in Dt 28:57 (“womb,” lit. “feet”). (CSB)

Lit, “and she touched [it] to his feet.” A symbolic action may be involved. However, the Hbr verb can mean “to cast,” as in some other passages (Is 25:12; 26:5), which could fit the context of a family dispute, ending with Zipporah throwing the foreskin at Moses’ feet. Some rabbinic interpreters consider resistance by Jethro, the Midianite priest, as the reason the son was not circumcised. (TLSB)

bridegroom of blood. Indicating family conflict. Zipporah did not circumcise her son until a life was in danger. Though circumcision was practiced by a number of western Semitic tribes, Zipporah’s family may not have practiced it. The incident showed the importance of circumcision as a sign of God’s covenant (Gn 17:9–14) and the setting apart of Moses’ family as Israelites rather than Midianites. (TLSB)

4:26 *He let him alone.* The Lord no longer sought to kill Moses or his son, but it seems that Moses went on to Egypt alone. He was later reunited with his wife and sons in Midian (18:2–3). (TLSB)

bridegroom of blood. Circumcision may have been repulsive to Zipporah—though it was practiced for various reasons among many peoples of the ancient Near East. (CSB)

because of the circumcision. Zipporah gained either Moses' life or his appeasement by shedding her son's blood in circumcision. (TLSB)

4:27 *The LORD told Aaron.* The Lord spoke to him as to a prophet. Aaron was "glad in his heart" (v 14) to meet his brother again. (TLSB)

kissed. Customary family greeting. (TLSB)

4:29 *gathered ... the elders.* Moses would stand before Pharaoh as an official representative of a large group of people. This explains why Pharaoh granted him an audience and considered his proposal. (TLSB)

4:30 *Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses.* Aaron and Moses worked so closely together that it made little difference who performed the signs. (TLSB)

4:31 *visited.* Moses is received as God's representative both to Israel and Pharaoh and affirmed as Israel's representative to God. (TLSB)

they bowed their heads and worshiped. First mention of worship in Exodus but hardly the last. The Word of God brought them faith, which naturally prompted their worship. We do not know particulars about their beliefs or worship practices at this point. Clearly, some had knowledge of their ancestral faith, but others had fallen into idolatry (Jsh 24:14). (TLSB)

4:18–31 Moses returns to Egypt as an act of faith. Confronting Pharaoh with God's demands and confronting the people whom he fears (4:1) proves a daunting assignment. Yet Moses obeys, and the people believe. Luther calls faith the "skill above all skills. It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone" (AE 14:59). There is no other way to explain the faith of Moses and of the people, and there is no other way to explain our faith. By our own reason and strength, we cannot believe in Jesus Christ. But because "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel," I bow my head and worship (SC, Third Article, p xxxvii). • Lord, hear our prayer and lead us this day, no matter what challenges arise. Amen. (TLSB)