

Divinely deficient

by Scott Grant

Cutting the meat

I dribbled the ball up the court against the defense during basketball practice. I made good progress. I didn't turn the ball over. I crossed half-court. There was only one problem: I never used my left hand. This was not lost on my coach, who was watching carefully from the sidelines. His verbal instructions were often wry and quick. He wandered past me and muttered out of the side of his mouth, "It looked like you were holding the fork in your left and cutting the meat with your right." He was right. My left hand wasn't doing anything; my right hand was doing all the work. That's because I'm right-handed. I felt incompetent every time I tried to dribble the ball with my left hand, so I did so as little as possible, even in practice. I was afraid of the results.

The belief that we are incompetent haunts us and holds us back. It keeps us from moving forward in life. We're not alone. Moses, the servant of the Lord, felt incompetent. In Exodus 3:1-4:17, Moses offers up five objections to the Lord's choosing him to deliver the Israelites. As he lays his heart before the Lord, we see the heart of his resistance. It is his belief that he is incompetent. His objections move from the general to the specific and land here at the source of his fears: his perceived incompetence. His first objection was a general statement of doubt in himself (3:11). His second objection was a general statement of doubt in God (3:13). In Chapter 4, Moses gets more specific. First, he's afraid the people won't believe him (4:1). The reason he's afraid they won't believe him is that he doesn't speak well (4:10). This is the heart of it. He deems himself lacking in the one essential attribute for his appointed task. He's terrified of returning to Egypt because he doesn't speak well, and because of this he finally asks the Lord to send someone else (4:13).

Beneath it all for us, we likely cling to the belief that we are incompetent in an area that we deem crucial to life. That's why we don't strongly enter the light of life but lurk in the shadows. Or if we do poke our heads out, we try to dominate whatever situation we enter. But God has an answer for Moses, and he has an answer for us as well. It concerns neither withdrawal nor domination. And just as in Chapter 3, the answer is all about God. The Lord assures us of divine authority and power in order to encourage us to trust him.

Divine authority (4:1-9)

When Moses tried this deliverance thing 40 years earlier, he was neither believed nor listened to (2:14). It is a terrible thing to speak and not to be listened to or believed. When we speak, it is an expression of ourselves. We are offering ourselves to people. When someone doesn't listen to us, we feel as if we don't matter. We may even feel as if we don't exist. Moses' experience 40 years earlier was a traumatic one. One traumatic experience of being negated in this way can leave horrible scars. But usually it isn't just one traumatic experience; it's one traumatic experience piled on top of another and another. Perhaps when we were young, we felt like our parents never listened to us or took us seriously. Patterns of belief formed, and at a very deep level, we concluded that we didn't matter, that we were irrelevant. Our traumatic experiences may have convinced us that we are irrelevant, so we don't even try. We give up on life and people.

But the past is redeemable. It is not the present. We may feel that everything is set in concrete. But things change. People change. We change. Moses is afraid the people won't believe that the Lord has appeared to him. But the people now are at a different spiritual place than they were 40 years earlier. When Moses tried to deliver them before, they weren't ready to be delivered. But increasing affliction caused them to cry out to the Lord (2:23). Before, the Lord had not in fact appeared to Moses. Moses didn't even try to convince anyone that the Lord had appeared to him, because the Lord hadn't. Now it's different. The Lord has spoken to Moses and called him.

Moses has changed in that the wilderness has made him more open to the Lord. More receptivity to the Lord changes us. He appears to us in more powerful ways. He assures us. He gives us more confidence in him. We may have felt neglected for most of our lives, but the Lord sets about repairing the damage and rebuilding us. That's what he does for Moses. Here the Lord assures Moses of the authority he has been given.

The Lord assures Moses through three signs by which the people will believe that the Lord has appeared to him. But actually, the signs are for Moses, to give him confidence before the people. The signs involve his staff, his hand and the Nile. In the sign of the staff, Moses is shown he has authority over the devil. In the sign of the hand, he is shown he has authority over the flesh. In the sign of the Nile, he is shown he has authority over the world. He has authority over the world, the flesh and the devil, the three enemies that the New Testament speaks of.

When Moses throws his staff on the ground, it becomes a serpent. The Lord asks Moses to grasp the serpent by its tail - the one place you don't want to grab a snake. Grabbing a snake by its tail enables it to maneuver into a position to strike. Yet this is what the Lord asks Moses to do. When Moses stretches out his hand to grab the serpent, he is trusting the Lord. The Lord gives Moses a little behind-the-scenes opportunity to trust him. No one is present, and no one is watching save the Lord. The Lord gives us such opportunities as well - behind the scenes, away from the crowds, when there's no reason to perform. We face the choice, even in little personal tasks, to panic or trust him. The Lord is giving us these opportunities in order to build our faith so that when we move out into the more public arenas, we'll trust him.

A serpent appeared earlier in the Pentateuch, as the embodiment of evil in Genesis 3. It was the devil himself. Tellingly, Moses flees from it. But even when he grabs it at its least vulnerable spot, it turns out to be harmless. It becomes a staff again. This is a message from God that Moses has authority over Satan. But it is God's authority. Henceforth, Moses' staff is known as the staff of God, reminding him of the authority the Lord has given him and of his dependence on the Lord (4:20).

The Lord has shown us, too, that we have authority over the evil one. At the cross, Christ disarmed Satan so that he can bring no accusation against us (Colossians 2:15). In the resurrection and ascension, we were raised up with Christ, far above the authority of Satan (Ephesians 2:6). As children born of God, the evil one can't touch us (1 John 5:18). As believers in Jesus Christ moving forward into life, we have authority over Satan in spiritual conflict. This is not rank we have to pull, but rank we already have. We simply believe it and move forward. As the Lord showed Moses his authority through this sign, the Lord shows us our authority through the word of God.

Next, Moses no doubt is worried about his own sin. All of us are inclined to think that our sin somehow disqualifies us. Leprosy is a symbol of sin (Numbers 12:10, Deuteronomy 24:8-9). When Moses sees leprosy covering his hand, he's reminded of his own sin. Yet when he puts his hand into his bosom again, it is restored. Moses' faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, just as Abraham's faith was. God sees him not as covered with sin but as clean. This is how God sees us as well, based on faith in Christ (Romans 3:21-26). Sin has the tendency to paralyze us, to make us think we are unqualified to even walk out the door. But because of Christ, sin has no authority to disqualify us. Win or lose, we can move out boldly, knowing that we're clean before God. The flesh, too, is disarmed, not in that we don't sin, but in that sin no longer disqualifies us.

Finally, the Lord tells Moses that if he will pour out some water from the Nile, it will become blood. The Nile was the lifeblood of Egypt. Without the Nile, Egypt was nothing. Egypt is representative of the world, in opposition to the people of God. In this sign, God is telling Moses that he has authority over Egypt, or the world. Egypt can't stop Moses, for God has given Moses authority over Egypt. We may be fearful of the opposition of the world, but Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). If Jesus has overcome the world, we can move into the world, with all its slings and arrows, confident in Jesus.

The knowledge of the authority God has given us over the world, the flesh and the devil should propel us outward, outside of ourselves and into the life God has prepared for us. The knowledge of the authority we've

been given changes us. Not only that, it changes others' response to us as well. True confidence, which is confidence placed in God, is recognizable and compelling. God is trustworthy. No one and nothing else compares in trustworthiness, so everyone is scared to death. They are either trying to dominate their world or withdraw from it. When someone with unpretentious confidence shows up, people take notice. When Moses returned to Egypt, with growing confidence in the Lord, the people of Israel took notice. And Pharaoh eventually had to take notice.

There were a few times in my rebellious teens when I and another friend snuck on to a country club to play three or four holes of golf before dark. We were not members of the club and had no authority to be there. Consequently, we were always looking over our shoulders, afraid that someone would catch us. Today when I play golf, I confidently walk around the course. I've paid the green fees and am thereby have authority to be there. Because I have the authority, I have confidence. God has given us authority over our biggest enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. We can walk around this world with confidence.

This assurance of the authority God has given us comes from the word of God as it is worked out in our own experience. And it can be worked out even now, as God gives us little behind-the-scenes opportunities to trust him and develop confidence in him and the authority he has given us. The life of faith is a life of dependence, which means it's a life of confidence, for God is dependable.

We need to know about this authority as we confront our deepest fears that at the bottom of everything, when all is said and done, we're just plain incompetent.

Divine power (4:10-12)

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter for Moses, the reason he thinks he can't enter into life. He pleads his case with God, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent ... " He doesn't have what he perceives to be the one essential qualification for the task: speaking ability. He's never been a good speaker. This is huge for Moses. All his objections stem from this doubt. When he asked God, "Who am I?" he was thinking, "I don't speak well enough to pull this off" (3:11). When he asked God, "What shall I say to them?" he's getting closer to his real concern: his ability to speak (3:13). When he asked, "What if they don't believe me or listen to what I say," he's thinking, "I don't speak persuasively enough" (4:1). He thinks what he needs for people to listen to him and believe him is something he doesn't have. Finally, he comes right out and says it, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent ... "

Perhaps this is why he ran in fear after his confrontation with the Hebrew slave who said, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:14). The text does not record that Moses spoke one word in response to these questions. The only response recorded is one of fear. It was in his heart to deliver his brothers (Acts 7:25). But he didn't tell anyone. He could have answered the Hebrew slave's questions and explained his heart to deliver the people from bondage. But he didn't. Perhaps it was because he had no confidence in his ability to speak persuasively. So he remained silent. And he ran. Afraid to speak, he checked out of life. Who knows how many times in the last 40 years he replayed that scene in his mind? Perhaps eventually, it became too painful to think about anymore. Whatever the psychological outworking, it's clear from these verses that all along he deeply believed he was incompetent based on his inability to speak.

Like us, Moses is afraid of not meeting expectations, and he's terrified of being rejected and feeling like a failure. Moses thinks, "If only I could speak better, I'd meet expectations, I wouldn't be rejected and I wouldn't feel like a failure." Ultimately what we're afraid of is bad feelings. And we think that if we were competent, our ability would enable us to overpower the fear of bad feelings. We're wrong, of course, because no matter how competent we become, we never think we're competent enough, so fear remains.

God has done many things for Moses up to this point on Mount Horeb. God has revealed himself; told Moses of his holiness, faithfulness, compassion and activity; promised success; and given him three signs that the people will believe him. Despite all this revelation, it's not enough for Moses. God didn't do for Moses the one thing Moses wanted him to do: Make him a better speaker.

Moses says, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, *nor since you have spoken to your servant*; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Since the Lord and Moses began speaking to each other, it is not lost on Moses that he is no more eloquent than before. The sign Moses is looking for is a smoother tongue - something the Lord doesn't give him.

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter for us. All of us are probably convinced, deep down, that there is at least one absolutely crucial attribute that we lack. We think that if we are to be received by people, something about us has to be more compelling. And we think that if God were really serious about moving us into life, the first thing he'd do is improve us. But he doesn't. He doesn't make us better looking. He doesn't make us more intelligent. He doesn't make us more athletic. He doesn't give us a better personality. For many of us, like Moses, we feel completely incompetent to speak. We feel like relational failures. Simply engaging in conversation is difficult for us. We don't know what to say, and we don't know how to say it.

Where do we find the answer to our perceived areas of incompetence? First, it's important to note where the answer isn't. If we don't think we're physically attractive enough, the answer isn't at the shopping center or the gym. If we don't think we're intelligent enough, the answer isn't at the local college. If we don't think we're athletic enough, the answer isn't on the playing field. If we think our personalities are not compelling enough, the answer isn't at the local bookstore. If we think our speaking ability isn't proficient enough, the answer isn't at Toastmasters.

The answer does not concern what we lack but what we need. The attribute Moses lacks is a smooth tongue. The attribute he needs is faith in God. We are in headlong pursuit of the wrong attributes. We want everything but faith. And once we get everything we think we need, then maybe we think we can exercise faith. Then maybe, we think, we can trust God and move forward. But even if we could somehow shore up our areas of incompetence and then move forward, it wouldn't be faith. We'd be dependent on our own competence, not God's.

No, that is not God's way. He doesn't change our areas of incompetence. Quite the contrary. He says he is responsible for them! He tells Moses, "Who made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" If we think we're unattractive, he made us that way. If we think we're unintelligent, he made us that way. If we think we're unathletic, he made us that way. If we think our personalities are bland, he made us that way. If we think we can't speak well, he made us that way.

Why? Why? Why?

Because what we really need is faith. God loves us too much to give us something we don't need. What we need is faith, and that's what he wants to give. The Lord says to Moses, "Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to say." The Lord doesn't fix Moses' tongue; he tells him to go. If he goes, he will exercise faith. One step toward Egypt is worth more than a thousand smooth tongues.

In Moses' capacity as a prophet, the Lord promises to be "with your mouth," meaning that the Lord will "teach you what you are to say." The greater thing the Lord wants to teach Moses is faith. Simple trust. The most underrated attribute. The most valuable attribute.

Simple faith has a tremendous impact. If people see us moving forward despite our deficiencies, the obvious question is, "Why?" The answer is faith, which is what the questioners need as well. Faith is not only what we need but what others need as well. When they see it working in us, we give them the opportunity to move toward faith. Thus God uses our supposed deficiencies not only in our own lives but the lives of others. Amazingly enough, God calls us to move toward people not in spite of our deficiencies but *because of* them. Through our "incompetence," God shows himself competent. These so-called areas of incompetence, then, are divine deficiencies.

The Apostle Paul had a divine deficiency that he called "a thorn in the flesh." Like Moses, he wanted it gone. He begged God to take it from him. God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul's response: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Paul learned faith, the most important attribute. Simple

trust. Check out the staggering results of his faith in the New Testament.

Like us, Moses is steeped in his feelings of incompetence. He is stubborn. God says "go." Moses won't go.

Divine concession (4:13-17)

When Moses begs the Lord to send someone else, he is telling the Lord, "I don't trust you." This angers God. How are we to understand God's anger? First, God is completely selfless. His love is pure, with no selfish motives. His heart is to give, not get. His anger is kindled out of love for his precious people when they choose paths that damage themselves and others. Moses is on the verge of missing out on life, and he's on the verge of leaving his people in their state of bondage. His passivity is damaging himself and his people, and the Lord is angry about this damage.

Cowardice is serious sin that does serious damage. We think that this is the least of the sins, that our fear really doesn't hurt anyone. But it inflicts tremendous damage, because we either withdraw in fear, refusing to impart the life of God in ourselves to others in need, or we dominate others in fear, leaving a path of broken lives in our wake.

When Al Andrews of the Institute of Biblical Counseling realized his tendency toward withdrawing in fear, he came to God: "That night I prayed a different prayer. I confessed my own cowardice and the harm I had done to others because of it. I prayed that I would fight well against my desire to retreat, and that I would love." He realized the harm that he inflicted on others by not exercising faith.

In response to Moses' plea to send another, the Lord begins speaking of Aaron's fluency. But before the Lord tells Moses why he's telling him about Aaron's fluency, he tells him that Aaron is even now coming out to meet him and will rejoice to see him. The subtle message goes something like this: "Moses, you are worried that your speaking ability will not be able to persuade anyone. But you haven't even said a word, and Aaron is already on his way to meet you. You're worried about the kind of reception you'll get, but before you even say a word, Aaron will rejoice to see you." The word "behold" in the narrative draws attention to this sentence. The Lord is telling Moses that it doesn't depend on his ability to speak.

But the Lord's exhortation to faith isn't enough for Moses. So the Lord makes a concession. He says Aaron will speak for Moses, standing in relationship to him as a prophet does to God, receiving and imparting Moses' words. It is only after this concession that Moses decides to depart, emphasizing that his reluctance to return ultimately stemmed from his feelings of incompetence. At this point he could have seen the Lord's final plea in the declaration about Aaron's greeting and refused the concession and said something like, "OK, Lord, I don't need Aaron; all I need is you." But he didn't. And it got him, and Israel, in trouble later. Aaron was not the Lord's chosen leader; Moses was. And when Moses went up to the mountain alone, Aaron conceded to the people's idolatrous wishes and made the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-6).

We don't need someone else to do what God is calling us to do. If our reason for letting someone else do something is because we're afraid to do it, we're probably letting someone else do what God is calling us to do.

When our family dog was dying, I made my younger brother take him to veterinarian. This was a fear-driven decision. I didn't want to have anything to do with that responsibility. So I pawned it off on someone else. I let someone else do what God was calling me to do.

Regardless of what the Lord has just said about Aaron, he tells Moses what he is to do: "And you shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs." The pronoun "you" or "your" occurs three times in this sentence, emphasizing God's call to Moses. The staff is the "staff of God" and is emblematic of the authority and power of God. The Lord is telling Moses, "As for you, you are to take my staff in your hand." This will serve as a reminder to Moses of his complete dependence on the Lord.

Despite the fact that God places us in a family of believers in Christ, there is a loneliness to faith. No one else can walk the walk for us. Others can encourage us, but no one can create faith for us.

Trust him

The Lord has given us the authority over the world, the flesh and the devil, so we can enter our worlds with confidence. And though we may think that we are incompetent, God is competent, and wants to show himself to be so. All we have to do is trust him. The Lord assures us of divine authority and power in order to encourage us to trust him.

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