

## The question isn't 'why' but 'who'

by Scott Grant

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### The Five W's

One of the first things I learned as a college journalism student was the importance of "The Five W's": who, what, where, when and why. In days gone by, the first sentence of a news story in any newspaper usually answered all of these questions. The goal was to tell the reader all the essentials in the first sentence. By the time I arrived at college, the trend in the newspaper business was to determine the "W's" most important to a particular story and address them only in the first sentence. The question the writer had to answer was, "Which is the most important question to answer for this story?"

In the stories of our lives, we invariably end up asking a lot of questions. Many of them begin with the word "why." Most of them seem to go unanswered. But that's OK, because the biggest question in our lives does not begin with "why" but with another "W": "who." That question is "Who is the Lord?"

Moses has just been blasted by the people because of the increased affliction that they hold him accountable for (5:20-21). Moses' predictable response is, "Why, Lord?" The Lord doesn't answer Moses' question directly. Instead, he answers it by revealing himself to Moses and by commanding him to keep moving forward in the face of resistance. The Lord often addresses our big "why" questions not by answering them but by revealing himself to us and commanding us to keep moving forward into life even after being rejected.

### The question: 'Why?' (5:22-23)

Under affliction, the people cried out to Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron but not to the Lord (5:15-21). Moses, though, knows who to cry out to: the Lord.

Forty years earlier, Moses attempted to deliver the people, but he failed and fled in fear (Exodus 2:11-15, Acts 7:25). For 40 years he has felt like a failure. The Lord convinces Moses to return to deliver the people, and it's the same old song. He must be thinking, "I'm a failure. I've always been a failure. I always will be a failure. Nothing has changed; nothing will change."

He asks the age-old question: "Why? Lord, if you knew I would be rejected again, why did you ever send me? Why did you allow me to get my hopes up?"

Perhaps we have what we view as a history of failure, particularly with people. Like Moses, we've isolated ourselves. Perhaps we're even afraid to introduce ourselves to others. But deep down we know this is not the way we should respond. The Spirit of God challenges us to move forward. In response, we take some tentative steps, and often our overtures aren't received, and it seems like the same old song. These feelings of failure taunt us: "I'm a failure. I've always been a failure. I always will be a failure. Nothing has changed; nothing will change."

Like Moses, we ask the age-old question: "Why? Lord, if you knew I was going to be rejected again, why did you ever send me? Why did you send me to this person, to this interview, to this job, to this ministry, to this church, to these people? Why did you allow me to get my hopes up?" Perhaps we even ask, "Why did you ever send me into this world?"

In 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed the home of Tom and Marjorie Glover in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Instead of moving, they rebuilt. In the storm of 1995, a 165-foot Douglas fir slammed into their

rebuilt house. What question do you think they asked? "Why?"

So Moses asks the question, "Why, Lord?" The Lord addresses Moses' "why" question in a most curious way.

### **The answer: 'I am the Lord' (6:1-9)**

The Lord's response to Moses' question is indirect. He doesn't say, "Oh, here's why I sent you, Moses." We find ourselves constantly asking the Lord "why" only to hear nothing in response.

The Lord is aiming for higher ground than "why." The better question is "who," as in, "Who is the Lord?" The Lord says, "You don't need to know why; you need to know me." Four times in these verses the Lord says, "I am the Lord." He says, "Here's who I am, and here's what I'm going to do." He says, "You will *see* what I will do." If we see what the Lord does, we can know who he is.

What will he do? Twice he says that Pharaoh's actions in releasing the people will be precipitated by the "mighty hand" of the Lord. If Pharaoh weren't resistant, the mighty hand of the Lord wouldn't be necessary, and Moses would never see it. Because we face intense opposition in life - rejection from without and within - we have the opportunity to see the mighty hand of the Lord: the power of God to overcome opposition. This means, most importantly, that we have the opportunity to see him.

The Lord tells Moses that he knows the Lord, and will know the Lord, in a way that the patriarchs never did. God was known to the patriarchs as "God Almighty" but not "the Lord," or Yahweh. They evidently knew the name Yahweh, which is his intimate, relational, covenant name, but they more closely identified him as "God Almighty." To the patriarchs, he was the covenant-making God who promised to give them, among other things, the land of Canaan, but they only lived there as aliens, not residents. To Moses, God is going to show himself to be the covenant-keeping God. The Lord tells Moses, "I have remembered my covenant."

The Lord tells Moses what he will do in keeping the covenant: He will bring them out, free them, redeem them, take them to himself, be their God and give them the land he promised to the patriarchs. "Bringing out" may be a reference to the Lord's bringing them out of Egypt by means of the 10 plagues; "freeing" may be a reference to his freeing them from the Egyptians in the collapsing of the Red Sea. The purpose of this bringing out and freeing was to "redeem" them. "Redemption" involves the restoring of something to its original purpose for the payment of a price. The price was evidently the first-born of Egypt (Isaiah 43:3).

What purpose is the Lord restoring them to? He says, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." He's restoring them to relationship with him.

The Lord says, "Then *you* will know that I am the Lord *your* God." This is not a bad definition for the meaning of life: To know the Lord, and to know that he is the Lord *your* God. How is Moses going to know this? Because he will see that the Lord has brought the people "out from under the yoke of the Egyptians." By seeing what the Lord does on his and the people's behalf, Moses can know who God is, that he is the Lord *his* God. Then the Lord says he will give them the land he has promised. In this intimate covenant relationship, the lord just wants to give.

Let's return to Moses' original "why" question and see how the Lord addresses our "why" questions. We ask the age-old question: "Why? If you knew I was going to be rejected again, why did you ever send me? Why did you send me to this person, to this interview, to this job, to this ministry, to this church, to these people? Why did you allow me to get my hopes up?" In other words, "Why is there such opposition?"

The answer goes like this: So that we can see the Lord overcome the opposition. Not only does he overcome the opposition, he brings us to himself and gives us good gifts. Seeing all this, we can know that he is the Lord our God, the Lord your God, the Lord my God.

After feeling like failures for years, we get the courage up to move toward people and situations only to face rejection and feel like failures all over again. We ask, "Why?" The Lord answers: "I am the Lord, who wants

to be known, and who you need to know. You don't need to know why, you need to know me." In order for us to know him, the Lord reveals himself to us in mighty acts against fierce opposition. And any opposition that we face in life simply inspires the true opposition: our own flesh, which, prompted by the world and the devil, fills our minds with fear. Our own fear is the fiercest opposition of all.

The Lord delivers us from our fears to show himself to us: to show us his mighty hand, which he uses on our behalf. And if we see his mighty hand, with sleeves rolled up for work on our behalf, we see him and we know more fully that he is the Lord our God.

So why do we face such fierce opposition? The answer is that we may know the Lord, and that we may know that he is the Lord our God, and that is all we need to know.

One of the most amazing scenes in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" is that of meal time. The prisoners in the Soviet gulag struggle through a miserable existence. They entertain dozens of "why" questions. But all the questions melt into the background during mealtime.

Solzhenitsyn writes: "The prisoners were at their coldest and hungriest when they checked in through these gates in the evening, and their bowl of hot and watery soup without any fat was like rain in a drought. They gulped it down. They cared more for this bowlful than freedom, or for their life in years gone by and years to come. They came back through the gates like soldiers from the wars with a lot of noise and cocky as hell. It was best to keep out of their way." When they ate, no one spoke a word. Solzhenitsyn writes, "These minutes were holy." He describes the main character, Shukhov, enjoying his bowl of soup: "He began to eat. He started with the watery stuff on the top and drank it right down. The warmth went through his body and his insides were sort of a quivering waiting for the gruel to come down. It was great! This was what a prisoner lived for, this one little moment."

We hunger to know the Lord with all the ferocity of a prisoner in a gulag hungering for soup. The Lord is what we want to gulp down. He is the warmth that goes through our body. He is what our insides quiver for. He is what we live for. And when we are satisfied by knowing him, all these "why" questions fade into the background.

Moses returns to the people, but they are too despondent to receive any message of hope. But the Lord tells Moses in so many words, "Based on who I am, act. Keep moving forward. Don't give up."

### **The command: Don't give up (6:10-7:7)**

After being rejected by the people, Moses is instructed to return to Pharaoh. Not surprisingly the big fear of incompetence, the last fear Moses expressed on Mount Sinai, returns with a vengeance. The one thing Moses felt he needed to convince Pharaoh was persuasive speaking ability, but he felt incompetent to speak. We would like our fears to dissolve in one mighty encounter with the Lord, but it usually doesn't happen that way. It's usually an inch-by-inch battle.

First, the Lord commands Moses to demand that Pharaoh release the people (6:10-11), but then he commands both Moses and Aaron to do so (6:13). Earlier, the Lord wanted Moses himself to confront Pharaoh, but when Moses refused, the Lord offered Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece (3:10-17). Despite the Lord's concession on Mount Sinai, he still offers Moses the opportunity to confront Pharaoh alone, in complete dependence on him. But Moses can't let go of his fears, so the Lord offers Aaron again.

The command, first to Moses and then to both he and Aaron, is to "go." They were rebuffed by Pharaoh the first time, but they are called to be persistent.

At this point the text takes what seems like a strange turn. Seemingly out of no where a genealogical listing is inserted. It begins to look like a genealogy of the 12 sons of Israel, beginning with the first-born, Reuben. The 12 sons are listed similarly in Genesis 49:1-27 and Exodus 1:1-4. But it breaks off after the third son, Levi. The focus then becomes the descendants of Levi, with particular emphasis on Moses and Aaron, who are highlighted in 6:26-27. But Aaron receives much more attention to Moses. None of Moses' descendants is

mentioned, while Aaron's wife, four sons, the wife of one of his sons and one of his grandsons are mentioned. What's the purpose of the text in emphasizing Aaron? Moses was afraid to confront Pharaoh because he felt incompetent to speak. Therefore, in the genealogy, the Lord brings Aaron, who will speak for Moses, to the fore. This is the Lord's way of addressing those fears, though not his preferred way.

Verses 28 and 29 of Chapter 6 are a recap of 6:11-13. The two sections, which relate Moses' fear of incompetence, form brackets around the genealogy, showing that Aaron, who is emphasized in the genealogy, represents the Lord's encouragement to Moses. The Lord explains Aaron's part. He will be Moses' mouthpiece (7:1-2).

The Lord says he will harden Pharaoh's heart. He will do this through his word, which will come through Moses and Aaron. The word of God either softens a heart or hardens a heart. The Lord's purpose in hardening Pharaoh's heart is to multiply his miraculous signs and wonders. These would be the 10 plagues and the parting and collapsing of the Red Sea - signs and wonders through which he will make himself known. The Lord intensifies the opposition to make himself unmistakably known through his deliverance from that opposition.

Where were the signs and wonders multiplied? In the land of Egypt. It's one thing for the Lord to demonstrate his power on Mount Sinai, as he did to Moses; it's quite another thing for him to demonstrate his power in Egypt - the place of darkness, oppression and bondage.

The Lord wants to enter our "Egypt" - the places of deep darkness, opposition and bondage. He wants to enter the place of our deepest fears and insecurities and multiply his miraculous signs and wonders there. If he liberates us there, in the place of our deepest darkness, what does that say about him? What does that say about his power and love?

The Lord then says he will bring out his "hosts," or armies. As he delivers us from our deepest fears, he turns us into warriors - warriors for the kingdom.

All this represents amazing change - a staggering turn of events. What the Lord does is so great that even the Egyptians will recognize the Lord.

Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them. They did it. Based on the Lord's revealing who he is to Moses, Moses obeyed the Lord's call to persistence. He returned to confront Pharaoh.

Among my most favorite stories that I covered in my newspaper days is that of Ed Burke, a Los Gatos hammer thrower in the sport of track and field. He was the best hammer thrower in the United States from 1966 to 1968, but he failed to win a medal in the 1968 Olympics. Bitterly frustrated, he quit the sport at age 29. "I felt that I had failed," he said. Eleven years later, his two daughters, who had heard of their father's former prowess, dusted off a rusty hammer in the garage and presented it to him. "They heard that I used to throw in the Olympics, and they wanted to see me throw it. So we piled in the truck and drove to San Jose State, and I showed them. On the way back I visualized what it was like walking in the Olympic parade again." So he began training again, and at the age of 44, he made the U.S. Olympic team in 1984, and he was chosen to carry the American flag and lead the U.S. team in the parade of athletes during the opening ceremonies.

So, be persistent. Don't give up. Keep moving forward.

## **Move forward**

We move forward, face intense opposition and ask, "Why?" The question isn't "why" but "who" - "Who is the Lord?" The Lord wants to be known, and he shows us through his mighty acts in order to bring us to himself. Based on who he is, we can move forward persistently into life, even after facing rejection.

