

# The Moses Dialogues: Knowing God as a Friend

 by EDWARD T. WELCH 

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“The Lord be with you.” Like a song with the final bar missing, these words must be completed.

“And also with you.” A call-and-response, it follows the primary language of heaven on earth in which God reveals himself and his ways with us, and we respond. However, unlike the call-and-response of our liturgies, these conversations are less scripted. They are deeply personal, from our hearts, sometimes barely verbal, other times a torrent of words.

When we go from church to the street, this basic structure of conversation continues, though it is between one person and another. At a coffee shop, one person talks while the other listens, then the baton is passed and the listener responds. Back and forth. Little do we know that it all comes from a heavenly template.

This kind of relationship with the Lord appears as early as Genesis 2. The intimacy of the conversation is even closer when Abraham speaks with the Lord. And it reaches its Old Testament zenith with Moses. “The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11). With Moses, we witness the birth of the Psalter, where God

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speaks, and we are moved by what he says and respond to him. Then we speak from our hearts, and he is moved by what we say, and he responds.

My objective is to look closer at three dialogues between God and Moses. Each took place on Sinai, God's mountain. These dialogues illustrate how prayers become skillful psalm-like conversations, teaching us how to be friends with God.

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illustrate how prayers become skillful psalm-like conversations, teaching us how to be friends with God and carry on the tradition of Israel's first psalmist. Though Moses's access to God was unique in the Old Testament, our permission to adopt the same mantle of friendship comes through Jesus, who has enlarged the invitation to us all as we come to the triune God through him.

### **A Dialogue about Rescue (Exodus 3:1–4:17)**

If you want to have a dialogue with God, your credentials are not critical. Moses was rejected by the Hebrews (Ex 2:14). Pharaoh sought to kill him (2:15). His work as a shepherd was unseen and without influence. The Midianites with whom he lived saw him as a foreigner, "an Egyptian" (2:19). Moses summarized his life like this: "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" (2:22). For you, any experiences that leave you feeling as though God is distant—rejection, displacement, not fitting in, feeling alien and powerless—do not disqualify you. You, too, get to hear God's invitation to a conversation. God has pursued you.

**God searches.** God's dialogues with Moses have a familiar beginning. He searches for and finds people who are not searching for him. He appears to Moses.

The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your

feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex 3:2–6)

God makes the first move by appearing in a fiery bush that is not consumed. The narrative points out that this got Moses’s attention, which, in turn, caught God’s, as though not everyone would stop at a burning bush. The dialogue begins.

God speaks Moses’s name, and he repeats it so there is no mistaking what he says. You heard this at least one other time: “Abraham, Abraham!” (Gen 22:11). This is no coincidence and evokes the importance of what is about to happen. Moses responds, “Here I am.” It is a common response, yet it picks up Abraham’s exact response to God’s call. The promises to Abraham are being both renewed and enhanced to Moses.<sup>1</sup>

God warns Moses not to come *too* near and to show respect by taking off his sandals as Moses suddenly finds himself in God’s house. Today, because of Jesus, we come much closer than Moses did. Then God introduces himself as the God of Moses’s earthly father and the God of the Hebrew patriarchs. God will reveal much more about himself, which is the center of this story. Moses now knows that this is the God who is both great and good, and he humbles himself before the reigning king.

After this introduction, “the angel of the LORD” is simply called the Lord. He brings Moses into the details of his plans, which is exactly how Jesus introduces his friendship with his disciples. “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Among the details the Lord speaks to Moses, his compassion is prominent. “I have surely seen the affliction of my people . . . heard their cry . . . know their sufferings . . . and I have come to deliver them” (Ex 3:7–8). The personal pronoun *I* is emphasized throughout the dialogue. God himself sees the suffering, and he himself will act. Consider one of his acts. “Come,” he says to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh” (3:10). Moses’s quiet life is suddenly upended.

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1. God actually uses the same expression, “Here I am,” when we call out to him (Isa 58:9).

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