

The God I Don't Yet Fully Understand

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Let's just pray while you remain standing. Father, we pray that you would help us as we look at your word today to understand it and understanding it, to be moved by your spirit, to live in accord with it.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, thanks for a couple of things. Thanks for allowing us to have that little bit extra in the service.

I think it's great to celebrate such events in people's personal lives and in the lives of our brothers and sisters. I had fun, and I think it's just very touching to see people and great to celebrate people who have been married for a good length of time because, as I said, I think God loves marriage.

I also thank you for learning that new song with me. It's actually, you know, it's an old song, but it's a new tune, and I thought we could try it out this morning, and I'm glad for the students that they could help us.

Now, in a few months, I celebrate, I think, 35 years of being a Christian, and as I reflect on the differences between when I first became a Christian and now, I realise that I'm really far more settled in my understanding of God than I was at 18.

[1 : 17] My understanding of God, you see, is settled as I've read the Scriptures, as I've grappled with the joy and pain of being God's person, as I've worked at being a husband, a father, and as I've struggled to explain God to other people.

However, I should also say that there are some things, I think, that are less settled than they were 30 years ago in my own mind. You see, the more I've read the Scriptures, and the more I've lived in God's world, and the more I find that there are things that I simply do not understand.

Perhaps I didn't understand them but thought I must at 18, but I've decided that I just don't understand them. And one of the reasons I love reading the Old Testament is because I find that I'm not the only one.

You see, when I read the Old Testament, I read about people being very honest about faith and about life. And as I read, I find them arguing with God. I find them expressing their dismay, their surprise, their angst, their pain, sometimes at God.

And I find God engaging with them. And I find Him loving them and being Himself with them. I wonder if you can see what I'm saying. You see, I'm saying that as I read parts of the Bible, I find that the authors of the Bible raise really big issues about God and with God Himself.

[2 : 33] I find them being very honest with God and very honest about God. And I find that refreshing. For their world is my world. Their God is my God.

And their questions are so often my questions. Friends, I started this way today because I think today's passage says some things that are difficult to understand. And I want to say that to you up front.

If you didn't think that when you read through the passage, wait until we have a look at it in detail. You see, I want to tell you that my hope is that as we look at this passage today, we will not fudge with what we find there.

That we will listen to it, see it, work and try and understand it. I hope that together we'll work out a way to approach these things in a way that honours the God who caused these things to be written for our instruction.

So, with those things in mind, open up your Bibles at Exodus chapter 4. Now, as we've done every week, I want us to remember together where we've been so far.

[3 : 38] You might remember that chapter 1 of Exodus recalled Genesis and told us that Abraham's descendants found themselves now in Egypt under the cruel tyrant who enslaved them.

And then on top of that, he attempted genocide against the Israelites by ordering the death of their infants. We heard how this was thwarted by some Hebrew midwives.

And as we watched, one couple attempted to save their son by putting him on a basket on the River Nile. That son was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up in Pharaoh's household. He became known as Moses.

And that Moses grew up and became a wanted man in Egypt. And so he fled and he found shelter with some Midianites in the wilderness. And at the end of chapter 2, we heard that the people of God groaned out to God and that he heard their groaning.

He remembered his covenant. He saw their plight and he knew. And last week, we saw, or two or three weeks ago, we saw God intrude onto the shepherd experience of Moses, called him to be an agent of rescue for the Israelites.

[4 : 42] And that brings us to the passage for this week. Now, I could have skipped over it, but the smart among you would have come to me and said, Andrew, what did you do with the last part of chapter 4? So we're going to have a look at it. So the first incident, I want you to have a look at it, verses 18 to 23.

It tells us of the departure from Jethro's household. Now, I want you to notice something about the departure from Jethro's household. You see, Moses is less clear with Jethro as to why he is returning to Egypt.

You see, in the previous chapter and a half, God has told, has been crystal clear with Moses as to why he's leaving Midian and going back to Egypt. Moses has nothing of that to say to his father-in-law.

Look at verse 18. He says, Please, let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living. That's not why he's going back. God's told him why he's going back. He's going back to rescue his people.

Moses is really not willing to lay it on the table for his father-in-law. We're not told why that might be the case. We're simply told what Moses had told his father-in-law. And we're also told that one of the immediate threats to the safety of Moses and his family is no longer there.

[5 : 47] You see, God tells him in verse 19 that those who wanted to kill him are now dead. And verse 20 tells us that Moses is not returning to Egypt empty-handed. No, you see, he returns with a family, a Midianite wife, some sons, and a shepherd's staff that has now become the staff of God.

Lastly, we hear God briefing Moses about his mission in Egypt. Look at verse 21. God says to Moses, when you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I've put in your power, but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

And then you shall say to Pharaoh, thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son. And I said to you, and I said to you, let my son go that he may worship me. But you refuse to let him go.

Now I will kill your firstborn son. Friends, in the previous chapter, we heard that Moses had some signs from Israelites to convince them that God had sent him, had sent Moses.

Well, in this section, there's some signs for Pharaoh. And those signs will be indications of just how intense this conflict is going to be. You see, this is a conflict between two kings and two fathers.

[7 : 00] And Pharaoh has taken God's son and has enslaved God's son. And so God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son. There's no mincing words here, friends.

This is the conflict that is being entered into. Now, with that, we move to the second incident, verses 24 to 26. And here is the really tricky part of this passage.

All of a sudden, there are massive problems. The translation of the original language is not as clear in our Bible. So what I've done is provide an alternative for you, which we're going to put up on the data projector.

Done. So, the alternative reads like this. Now, it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death.

Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his feet. By the way, feet here is probably a euphemism for genitals. And she said, You are a bridegroom of blood to me.

[7 : 59] So he let him alone. And at that time, at that time, she said, bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. They are amazing verses, aren't they?

They raise all sorts of questions. Now, let me tell you the questions that they raise in my mind. Who is it that the Lord wants to kill? Is it the son or is it Moses? Two.

If it is Moses, why would the Lord want to kill him just after he's given a command for him to go and rescue the Israelites? Three. What exactly does Zipporah do and why?

Four. How come Zipporah realises there's a problem and does nothing? Why doesn't Moses do something? Five. Moses is said to have sons, plural, but only one son is circumcised.

Why would that be? Six. Six. Whose feet does she touch with the foreskin? Seven. Who let whom alone? And eight.

[8 : 59] What does it mean to be a bridegroom of blood? Now, that's an enormous number of questions, isn't it? In my view, there's only two things you can be sure of here.

One. The Lord is seeking to kill someone. Two. That what is happening is about circumcision in some way or another. Having said that, let me offer my interpretation of what I think is going on here.

You see, now you can take it with a pinch of salt. There are no guarantees on it because no one seems to be very sure about what's going on here. But here is what I think is happening. For some reason, Moses or his son has not been circumcised yet.

And he's on his way to rescue, to Egypt, to rescue God's covenant people. However, he or his son, one of his sons or his sons do not have the covenant sign of circumcision yet.

Moses becomes seriously ill or is incapacitated by some disastrous illness or some incident. That clearly comes from the hand of God. Hence, God is behind it. His life is under threat from God, in other words.

[10 : 05] He may be so incapacitated that perhaps he can't even respond himself. Zipporah reads what's going on. She understands what's going on. God is angry with Moses for his disobedience to the commands given in Genesis 17 about circumcision.

So she grabs one of the boys, circumcises him, holds the foreskin to the genitals of Moses or the genitals of the boy, which is probably what feet means, and declares to Moses, you're a bridegroom of blood.

Now, this is really strange, isn't it, for us, but that appears to be what's going on. Somehow, this act settles God and takes away the problem and God leaves Moses alone.

And that brings us to section two. Now, I'm going to come back a little bit to that later on, but that's what I think is going on. Now, the third incident has a sort of sense of anticlimax to it. Moses meets Aaron, everything's okay.

Moses and Aaron meet the Israelite elders and everything's okay. Together, they bow down and worship when they see that God has heard and seen them. And the stage is now fully set for the confrontation between God and Pharaoh.

[11 : 12] So, there's the story, friends, in these last few verses of chapter four. Now, I would warrant that the vast majority of you have never heard a sermon on this passage before.

If you have, please come and tell me afterwards because you will be in a very small minority. And it is my guess that in your lifetime you may never again hear a sermon on this passage.

It is not a preacher's passage, but it is a passage from God's word, isn't it? And it's put there by God for a purpose. And so, like all the scriptures, there is sure to be something here that will teach, rebuke, correct or train us in righteousness for that is why God has placed it here.

So, let's have a look and see what we can learn from this passage. Now, let me start by talking about the things I don't understand from this passage. And there are a whole host of them.

Look at me, with me at verse 21. And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I've put in your power, but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

[12 : 20] Now, the language is clear, isn't it? God is the one who is behind the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh. Now, in your Bibles, just flip to chapter 8, verse 15.

So, chapter 8, verse 15. For we read there, But when Pharaoh saw that there was no respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them just as the Lord had said.

Now, the implication of this statement here is also clear. Pharaoh resists God out of his own free will. Now, how do you put those two statements together?

How can they both be true at the same time? Well, here, I want to say, I don't know, but I know that they are. So, I don't know, but I know that they are.

I know that if my explanation of this mystery diminishes either statement, then perhaps I'm not being faithful to the text. Can you understand what I'm saying? Both are true.

[13 : 23] Both are there. How do they work? I'm not sure. Now, look at verse 23. There are other things you see I don't understand about this passage. Verse 23, I said to you, let my son go that he might worship me, but you refuse to let him go.

Now, I will kill your firstborn son. Now, when I read that passage, I can't help reading it as a Christian, for that is who I am. And as a Christian, I've heard the words of Jesus about turning your cheek and the like.

There's none of that here, is there? That doesn't sound like turning your cheek. God has a son. That son is under threat and he, God, will kill another person's son in order to free his son.

Now, friends, that is tough and hard, isn't it? It's all about, it sounds like an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. But it's also, if I might put the other side as well, it's also about a love that will do anything for a loved one, isn't it?

Now, that too I find hard to understand, how those two things can be matched together in that way. But there's more. Look at verse 24. I don't understand verse 24 when it talks about God seeking to kill Moses.

[14 : 35] Now, I know Moses had been a little bit reluctant. I know he's been something of an unwilling conscript. I know he's been a bit slack in regard to his own covenant response.

But verse 24 seems pretty tough and it doesn't fit neatly with what I think God would or would not do. But it's there. So I don't dodge it.

So what are the implications for these things I don't understand? What do I do with it when I find these things that I don't understand? Well, the implication, I think, is clear. The implication is that as yet my view of God is still lacking something.

You see, the clear implication is that my view of God is not as strong yet as it should be. But there's more than that. The clear implication is also that there are things about God that perhaps I will never understand.

Perhaps this is the way things will always be because God is God and I am a feeble human being with a feeble mind. Perhaps it's unreasonable to assume that I can ever plumb the depths of God.

[15 : 37] Perhaps it's unreasonable to assume that I'll ever understand all that God does or why he does it. And perhaps I should recognize this. And when I find myself not understanding something, perhaps I should view the things I don't understand in the light of the things that I know to be true.

Does that make sense? To view the things I don't understand in the light of the things I know to be true. You see, in the cross of Jesus, I know that God is just.

In the cross of Jesus, I know that God is a God who loves me so much that he sent his son to die in my place. This I understand. This is beyond a shadow of doubt for me.

My whole life is based on these truths. This I understand. And sometimes I'm going to have to cling to these things and put the things I don't understand in a folder marked pending.

I have a folder like that in the back of my brain, a little fool's cap. folder. And it has a sign on the top of it that says pending. That means one day I'm going to ask God.

[16 : 48] At the moment, I put it in the pending drawer because I know the things that are true. I know that God loves me. I know he sent his son into the world. I know that God is just and the justifier of him who has faith in him.

I know those things to be true. But there are some things I don't yet understand. Friends, I really want to emphasize this today. You see, I think we often view God through the things that are difficult and not plain.

I'm suggesting we start not with the things that are difficult and not plain, but the things that are not difficult and are plain. Does that make sense? So start with the things you know to be true and are as clear as day and let the other things be subsets of them.

you see, we see God most plainly in his revelation in his son Jesus Christ. There we see God as he wants to be seen and understood. So let's start there and in one sense let's finish there.

And that may mean that there are some things we just need to put into that folder marked pending. I'm sure they'll be resolved, but I'm just not sure at the moment how.

[17 : 56] Having said that, I want to go on and explain that for all the difficulties of this passage, there are some things I do understand about it. And here they are. Let me tell you some of them. The first thing I understand is that the God of Exodus 4 is much more, is more than the God I often hear spoken about.

You see, the God of Exodus 4 is a holy God. He is terrifying in his holiness and his justice and his tough love. He is not tame, is he?

This God in Exodus 4 and the God you'll see in the chapters that come after this is not tame. He is not docile. He is dangerous to be around. He's not the tame God that I often hear about in our songs and our choruses.

He is the holy creator of the earth to whom all will one day bow the knee. But let me press on. You see, no matter how you interpret verses 24 to 26 here, there's one part of it that does not go away.

You see, verses 24 to 26 give us a pattern that I think we see time and time again within scripture. You see, here we have a man. This man has been miraculously rescued by God as a child.

[19 : 05] He's been preserved by God from harm from his countrymen. He has heard God's voice from a burning bush. He's been called out by God to rescue God's people and to be the source of God's blessing.

He's been on the receiving end of God's blessing and God's provision. salvation and yet he has not kept the most rudimentary aspects of covenant obligations.

You see, he's been called to be the agent of God of the covenant, but he hasn't even ensured that the male members of his family were the sign of the covenant. Now, that pattern of behavior, I reckon, is not uncommon in the Bible.

It is repeated time and time again in the book of Exodus and in the Old Testament as a whole. You see, time and time again, we will hear the children of Israel calling out for God to remember the covenant and we'll hear them urging them to do that in their prayers, their laments, their psalms, their songs, their sacrifices and time and time again we will hear how God responds with surprising, unobligated love and faithfulness to his people.

Where there had been sin, there'll be forgiveness. Where there was judgment, there'll be mercy. Where there was slavery, there'll be rescue. And the people of God will do what they do so readily in this passage.

[20 : 21] They'll bow down and worship. And when the time comes to trust God or obey God, they will fail. And they'll fail again.

And sometimes they will sin with a very high hand, such as when they make a golden calf or golden calves. They will, you see, refuse to keep even the most rudimentary aspects of their covenant obligations.

For example, they won't keep the Sabbath. Eventually God will tire of their faithlessness. He'll become angry at their sin. But he will hold off for a long, long, long, long, long time.

But in the end, he will stretch out his hand in judgment and send them off into exile. Friends, don't, let's not fudge with what this passage says. It tells us an uncomfortable truth.

And that truth is that our God is a living and holy God. God is the God who is deeply saddened and deeply angered by human sin. That means he's angered with our sin.

[21 : 25] But he's also the God who has allowed his anger to be turned away through the death of his son Jesus for us. He is long suffering, not wanting any to perish.

He continues to give us time, to give this world time, to find shelter in the escape offered in the death of his son. And he continues to call us to proclaim that escape through the proclamation of the gospel.

And he continues to call us, you and me, to be his agents of that proclamation. And it's here that I want us to hear this passage speak to us. And I'd like to talk to two groups of people here today.

First, I want to address all of us. Friends, we are people who have been called by God. He's called us to be his agents in his world.

He's called us to carry the wondrous news of his son to our world or his world. And yet we know that some of us here are living in plain disobedience to some of the most rudimentary of God's covenant obligations.

[22 : 31] We know that. Some of us are engaged in the very risky business of trying to serve two gods. We're engaged in idolatry, of worship of work, worship of our families, worship of money.

Others of us are refusing to love as we have been loved or to forgive as we have been forgiven or to accept others even as God has accepted us. Others of us are failing our spouses either by refusing to love or to forgive them or we are being actively unfaithful in one way or another.

Perhaps we're living in relationships where we abuse others either psychologically or sexually or physically. Others of us are perhaps not being diligent and godly parents. Some of us are living double lives, appearing to be godly, to be good and godly, but really in fact living a secret life of sin and unholiness.

Friends, we have been called to be God's people and that is a call to be holy. It is a call to reflect what you know of God in every area of your life.

So if you're caught in sin, then seek forgiveness and pursue faith and obedience and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

[23 : 53] God's people and the Lord. We bear the name of Jesus Christ. Let's not cause that name to be blasphemed or put to shame by our actions. We bear the name of Jesus Christ.

So this I think is the word that springs from this passage for all of us. However, I want to have a special word for those of you who are in leadership amongst God's people.

I mean any sort of leadership. So this is a word particularly for myself, isn't it? But your leadership can be leadership exercised in any area. If you're in any sort of leadership among God's family, then let me urge you to take care for this scripture and the life of Moses tells us that the leaders of God's people are to be judged with a stricter judgment, just as James says and 1 Corinthians says.

Jesus says it in Matthew 18, doesn't he? He says those who put stumbling blocks in the way of God's people will seek, will suffer a punishment worse than having a millstone hung around their necks and being drowned in the deepest part of the sea.

Or as Paul says, as I said in 1 Corinthians 3, those who build God's house will have their work tested by fire. Friends, God is holy. God loves his people and he loves them so much that he will judge those who hurt his people.

[25 : 20] Friends, if we are engaged in Christian ministry in any way among God's people, any sort of leadership amongst God's people, then we must do it with carefulness and prayerfulness.

In the words of 1 Timothy 4, we must watch our life and doctrine carefully. We must train ourselves in godliness. Or as God instructs us in 1 Peter, we must be examples to the flock.

You see, the church is not a business. It is not an enterprise. It is not a company. It is not a corporation.

It is a congregation. It is the congregation of God's people. It is the company of God's greatly loved covenant people.

The church of the firstborn. And the chief shepherd loves them. And we have a chief shepherd to whom we will have to give an account.

[26 : 23] And he is the same shepherd as the shepherd at work in Exodus. Let us pray. Father, as so often in the Old Testament, we see examples that you have given us that we should take note of.

And we have seen such an example even in Moses. A man who had seen and received so much from your hand. And yet couldn't even keep the most basic of covenant obligations.

Father, we pray that you would help us. For we see in Moses ourselves that we have been given so much and yet often fail in so little. Please help us.

And Father, please provide us with leaders here at this church who are faithful, who look after this church as your people, knowing that they have a chief shepherd to whom they must give an account.

And Father, we pray this at all levels of our congregation in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 48] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.