

IT'S
NOT
TOO
LATE

TONY EVANS



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*This book is gratefully dedicated to
all those discouraged believers
who are looking for a second chance.*



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Introduction

One of my greatest joys in life is the privilege of being a pastor. It's a responsibility I do not take lightly. As a pastor, I frequently walk with people through their hurts, pains, and disappointments.

Sometimes, in the midst of their pain, people will ask me, "Is it too late for me? Is it too late for God to do something with me?" Those questions come out of a deep place where people think their many failures have caused them to have forfeited their God-given destiny. When asked that question, I always have one response: "No, it's *not* too late. It's *never* too late for God."

God frequently uses broken people to accomplish His purposes on earth. Time after time in Scripture, we read about broken people whom God raised up in marvelous ways. He used Moses, a murderer, to deliver the Hebrew slaves. He used Jacob, a liar and a trickster, to fulfill His promise to Abraham. He even included Rahab, a harlot, in the messianic family line. If God redeemed their lives, He can redeem your life too.

Brokenness should *never* keep you bound. Rather, it should release you into a life of freedom. A truly broken person understands the reality of John 15:5, where Jesus says, "Apart from Me you can do

nothing.” A broken person who has learned to depend on God is a force to be reckoned with.

Yet when you're staring at your past, strewn with failure, it's difficult to see your bright future, just as it's difficult to drive when you're constantly looking in your rearview mirror. When you drive, you need to glance at your rearview mirror, but if you continue to look there, you will end up hurting yourself and the others around you. That's why the windshield is so much larger than the rearview mirror—the windshield shows you where you're headed, not where you've been.

Halftime and Hope

If you've ever watched a football game, you know that midway through the game, the teams go to their respective locker rooms for halftime. Halftime is a time for rest and assessment. It's a time to regroup—to evaluate how things have been going and to decide what adjustments need to be made for the rest of the game.

The first half of any football game is important, but it is not determinative. Numerous teams over the years were ahead at halftime only to eventually lose the game. And numerous teams were losing at halftime, but by the time the game ended, they had turned things around. Until the final whistle is blown, the game is still up for grabs.

The same is true in life. You might be in your first or second quarter or heading into halftime, but if you are still here, the game of life is not over. Your clock is still ticking. There is plenty of life yet to live. Not only that, but your first half doesn't have to determine the outcome of the game. Maybe you've made mistakes and poor decisions; perhaps you've experienced many disappointments and failures. Maybe life has dealt you a harsh blow here or there. *But you are still here.* And as long as you're still here, the whistle has not blown and it is not too late for God to take you straight to the plan

He has for you. It is not too late for God to lead you into your glorious tomorrow!

See, God looks at your future while the enemy tries to keep you focused on your past. God says, “You *can* in spite of what has been done!” But the enemy says, “You *can’t* because of what you’ve done!” God will never define you by your past, but the enemy will try to confine you by your past. Whether it’s the good, the bad, or the ugly that dominates your first half, Satan’s goal is to keep you chained there. But my charge to you as we go through these pages together is to never let your yesterday keep you from your tomorrow. Learn from yesterday—just don’t live in it.

Once a Hillbilly, Always a Hillbilly?

Do you remember Jed Clampett and *The Beverly Hillbillies*? What made that TV show so interesting is that Jed and his family had been delivered from their past—a life of poverty and hillbillydom back in the Ozarks—but even after they moved to Beverly Hills, they continued to live their hillbilly ways. Their location had changed, but their mindset hadn’t. The Clampetts’ past devalued both a valuable present and a valuable future.

The same was true for the Israelites who escaped from 430 years of control by the Egyptians. The Israelites had left Egypt, but Egypt had not left them. As they sent spies into the Promised Land, they stood on the precipice of a glorious tomorrow, but because they chose to focus on the challenges they would face in that Promised Land, they grumbled and complained, wanting to go back to their past instead. “At least we had leeks, onions, fish, and plenty to eat in Egypt,” they whined, choosing to look at life through their rearview mirror rather than focusing on the promises up ahead.

When God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, He delivered them *from* their past and *into* their future—Canaan. Yet because they chose to be so focused on yesterday, they missed their tomorrow. As a result,

they had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years so God could disconnect them from their past. Many of us cannot get to our tomorrows because we are still carrying baggage from our past.

The Israelites remained tethered to their past because they failed to do what Hebrews 4:1-2 tells us is essential if we are to enter into the destiny God has for us—we must combine God's Word with faith.

Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.

Faith means acting on God's Word. Faith is acting as if something *is* so even when it is *not* so in order for it to *be* so simply because God *said* so. Faith is always an action. That's why we're told to walk by faith and not to talk by faith. Until a truth from God's Word has been put into action in your life, it will be merely a spiritual theory. It will not be a concrete experience. Without an action, it will die in the wilderness. God is not as interested in your "amen" as He is in your action.

If you want a bag of cement to become concrete, you have to mix it with water. Likewise, you have to mix God's Word with faith in order for it to become a concrete experience in your life. The Word of God can make you feel good and give you an emotional high, but those feelings won't last long if the Word isn't mixed with faith. Faith demands an action, not just a feeling.

The people of Israel could have walked to Canaan in 35 days. But what should have taken 35 days ended up taking 40 years because they kept looking back. Maybe that sounds familiar to you. Maybe you expected to be further along in your life by now—further in your

career, your relationships, your family, your finances, or even your emotional and spiritual well-being—but instead you keep looking back. You keep saying, “What if...why...but...” and everything else that can be said about yesterday.

You fear that you have blown it. You have missed your opportunity. You have failed. Or you fear that someone else has messed you up too much, that he has stolen your future or your hope. Yesterday is real to you. And it certainly *is* real. I’m not suggesting your past isn’t real. But you need to stop looking at the leeks and the fish of your yesterday and instead look ahead to the milk and honey of your destiny. God gave the spies a glimpse of their tomorrow, and He has given you a glimpse of what He has in store for you too. It’s a glimpse of a good future with a hope.

Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, the individuals we’re about to study in this book acted in faith in response to God’s Word. As a result, many of them have been memorialized in the Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith, and all are remembered for having fulfilled God’s calling on their lives. God is waiting for you to join them in taking the leap of faith into His arms of grace.

It’s Not Too Late

Hospital maternity wards are some of the most optimistic places on earth. With four children and ten grandchildren (at the time of this writing—the number of grandchildren keeps growing!), I have had the opportunity to get to know the maternity ward pretty well.

As noses press against the window and eyes look down at the newborns, you can hear parents, grandparents, family, and friends express their congratulations, joy, expectations, and hopes for the babies. Hope springs eternal in the maternity ward—as it should. We want to believe that our sons, daughters, relatives, or friends will one day grow up to change the world, win the Super Bowl, write a bestselling novel, or become the president of the United States.

Though many hearts overflow with hope on that day of birth, not everyone will see their dreams come true as the days turn into years and the years turn into a lifetime. Life has a way of throwing us curveballs, handing us difficulties, and presenting us with challenges that can strip the wind right out of our sails.

When this happens, many of us long for a do-over. Just as children often shout, “Do-over!” when they don’t like the way something turned out, we long for another chance. We long to stand before life and say, “Do-over!” But the reality is that we can’t change the past. Because of this, many people are stuck in their present simply because they are stuck in their past. And even though Christians frequently claim the miracle-working, unlimited power of God, most think that even God isn’t in the business of giving do-overs.

It is true—even God can’t (or won’t) change your past. But He can change your future, and that truth alone should give you hope. There is always hope when you have God on your side. Friend, if you hear anything from me over the course of this book, hear these four words: *It’s not too late.*

As you read this book, I want you to experience this reality through the lives of people who could have thought it was too late for anything good to come of them. They may have done something, such as make a bad decision, or something may have been done to them. Regardless, it was not too late for God to turn their mess into a miracle.

It was not too late for Jonah. He ignored God’s command to preach a call of repentance to the people of Ninevah and ended up in the belly of a whale. But God rescued a repentant Jonah, who went on to lead one of the greatest revivals of all time.

It was not too late for Samson. He turned his back on his vows to God and partied with the Philistine women. He lost his supernatural strength because of his sin, but in his brokenness, he called on God one last time, and God used him to defeat his enemies.

It was not too late for Sarah. Sarah doubted God’s promise that she would give birth to a son, laughing at the news because of her

old age. She plotted a human solution in a failed attempt to bring about a supernatural promise, but God in His mercy fulfilled the promise in Sarah's latter years.

It was not too late for Peter. Despite a defiant declaration that he would never leave Jesus, Peter denied Christ three times. But Peter's life was restored spiritually, and he went on to accomplish things the fisherman could never have imagined.

It was not too late for Rahab, Jacob, or Esther either, and it is definitely not too late for you. God has a purpose, a destiny, and a goal for your life. Don't go backward on Him now. You've come too far. You can't change your past regardless of how much you may want to. But your past does not have to determine your future. It's not too late to live in the hope and the high calling that are yours in Jesus Christ.

Regardless of what you have done, regardless of what others have done to you, and regardless of the depth of the pit you're in, God can still restore and use you. *It is not too late.* But don't take my word for it. Read on. Join me on this journey as we go deeper into the lives of broken people who left us a legacy of faith.

Moses Was a Murderer

Moses was a murderer. It doesn't get much worse than that. At the age of 40, Moses killed a man, and as a result he was snatched straight from the heart of Egyptian luxury and dropped in the middle of a desert called Midian to babysit sheep for the next 40 years.

What a detour!

Bad decisions can cause our lives to veer off course—not only for a year or two but for decades. Rebounding seems like an impossible feat, but that's exactly what Moses had to do.

If you've spent much time with sheep, you know that sheep don't make for very stimulating company. In fact, more than likely, Moses was frustrated and bored by the sheep. How else can you explain the fact that in Egypt, Moses was “a man of power in words and deeds” (Acts 7:22), but later he argued with God's call on his life—not once but twice—because he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10) and “unskilled in speech” (Exodus 6:12)? Those are two completely opposite realities. You can't be both “a man of power in words” and “unskilled in speech” at the same time.

Something happened to Moses in Midian. It wasn't simply that he got old, his bones began to ache more than they used to, or his hair turned gray. In Midian, Moses lost touch with who he was. He lost his confidence. He forgot his own potential. Or as I like to say, Moses lost his *mojo*.

You've probably never murdered anyone, but you may have lost your *mojo* somewhere along the way. If you don't know what I mean by *mojo*, it's simply that spark, energy, and enthusiasm that makes you, *you*.

Maybe you once made a decision that put your life on the wrong track, and you have regretted it to this day. Instead of blazing through life, the best you can hope for is a little flicker now and then.

I imagine that early on, like most people, you had dreams. You had a vision. You knew what you were good at and the skills you could use to make a difference in the world. In fact, you may even have thought you could take on the world. But then you found yourself in Midian, and as time went by and you kept dealing with the same sheep day in and day out, kept going to the same watering hole day in and day out, kept hearing the same complaints of rocky paths and itchy wool day in and day out, the spark inside you fizzled out.

If it has, I'm going to ask you to trust me—not because of who I am but because of who God is. The stories on these pages are not my stories. These are God's stories, and He preserved them for you and me to encourage us. So that's my question to you—will you do it? Will you trust me? Because what I'm about to tell you can change your life. God's truth has the power to do just that.

Moses Lost His Mojo

The first thing I want to tell you is that if you have lost your *mojo*, you are in excellent company. We mentioned that the same thing happened to Moses—one of the greatest heroes of the Bible. When the time was ripe for Moses to fulfill his life's calling and lead

a few million people out of bondage and into freedom, he didn't even want to answer the call. "How are they going to believe me? Pharaoh won't listen to me," Moses argued. He sounded like a teenager throwing a fit because he doesn't want to do his chores. "You've got the wrong man, God. The people didn't listen to me, and Pharaoh won't either," Moses said in my Tony Evans paraphrase of Exodus 6:12.

But Moses was wrong. And you're wrong too if you believe God can't or won't use you. Friend, God has a plan for you and a plan for me, just as He had a plan for Moses. His plan for you may not include leading a few million people out of slavery, but His plan is good because He's a good God. It's a plan with a future and a hope.

If Moses can rebound after 40 years on the sideline, you can too. In fact, it's because of Moses and his rebound that I'm writing this book for you. With so much to learn from his life and the lives of the others we're going to look at, no one should *ever* think that it's too late for God to turn things around. If you have thought about giving up, throwing in the towel, or dismissing yourself from making any meaningful contribution in life, *don't*. It's not too late. Remember what I asked you to do? Trust me. Not because of me but because of God and the truths I'm about to share with you.

Now, I'm not going to argue with you—maybe you did make a wrong choice or many wrong choices. And maybe your situation does look bleak from the outside, from the inside, or both. But I doubt it looks any worse than an old man in Midian walking with sheep every day.

You're still here, still reading this page, so it's not too late for God to do something amazing in and through you. God is the great unfigure-utable God, and His ways are much higher than our ways. Never look at your circumstances. Never look at yourself. Chances are your view of yourself and your circumstances has become distorted, just as Moses' was.

Instead, I want you to focus on God. See what He does with each

of the lives we are going to look at in this book. And when you do, I want you to dare to hope again. Dare to dream again. Dare to pick up your mojo and put it on again. God turned Moses' hopeless desert situation completely around, and He can turn your situation around too.

The Making of Moses

Scripture tells us that from the time Moses entered the world, a Hebrew baby born to a slave family at the height of Egypt's domination and rule, he was a beautiful child. Something special about Moses made people willing to risk punishment from the Egyptian leaders in order to save him.

Exodus 1 explains that at that time, a new Pharaoh had risen to power in Egypt. He "did not know Joseph," the Israelite who had played a critical role at a time of extended national famine (Exodus 1:8). Joseph's plan had saved the Egyptians and many of the people in the surrounding nations, including his own father and brothers and their families.

Before long, the 70 Hebrews (not counting wives) who had come to live in Egypt had multiplied so much that Pharaoh felt threatened. So Pharaoh made a decision. "The people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land" (verses 9-10).

At first, the plan was to wear out the Hebrew people through hard labor, hoping not only to discourage them but also to reduce their number. Pharaoh must have assumed that if the Hebrews were exhausted from working, they wouldn't have the incentive, strength, or time to continue populating the land. The Egyptians "appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses" (verse 11).

But the more the Egyptians tried to wear out the Hebrews, “the more they multiplied and the more they spread out” (verse 12). As a result, the Egyptians increased their oppression, making the Hebrews’ lives “bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field” (verse 14).

Still not having reduced the number of Hebrew births in his land as much as he had hoped to, Pharaoh decided to reduce that number himself. He “spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, ‘When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death’” (verses 15-16). But the Bible tells us, “The midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live” (verse 17).

So Pharaoh broadened his attack and declared, “Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile” (verse 22). This is what eventually happened to baby Moses, although he wasn’t exactly “cast” into the Nile. Instead, Moses’ mother found “a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile” (Exodus 2:3).

It just so happened that while Moses was floating in the river in his wicker basket, Pharaoh’s daughter came by. While bathing in the Nile, she saw the basket and asked her maid to go get it and bring it to her.

When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.” Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?” Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Go ahead.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. Then Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child away and

nurse him for me and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him (Exodus 2:6-9).

Talk about a turnaround! One minute baby Moses is about to be killed, and the next minute he is growing up in Pharaoh’s house and his own mother is paid to raise him! In the book of Acts, we get a glimpse into the boy that the writer of Acts calls “no ordinary child” (Acts 7:20 NIV). We read, “Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action (verse 22 NIV). In other words, Moses was living large. He went to the best schools and had the best education and the best opportunities.

Moses never had to worry about finances or whether he would be wearing name-brand clothes. He had culture, skills, and power. In fact, as a trusted member of Pharaoh’s household, he was in line to become a powerful ruler in Egypt.

But something happened when Moses turned 40 that would forever change his life.

Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Exodus 2:11-12).

Moses remembered what he had been told about who he was. We don’t know who told him, but there is a good chance that Moses’ mother whispered in his ear, “You’re not one of them,” as she took care of him. “You are one of us, Moses,” she might have said. “You’re an Israelite.” We know Moses knew because we read that Moses went out to his “brethren.” In fact, the passage mentions the word *brethren* twice, making certain that we don’t miss that Moses knew he was an Israelite and not an Egyptian.

Curious about his people and seeking to identify with them, Moses

decided to be associated with the people of God rather than live large in Egypt. He was committed. He was determined. He was even powerful. He just didn't know the right way to do what he wanted to do.

When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not (Acts 7:23-25 NIV).

Moses thought wrong, so he acted wrong. Moses saw an Egyptian messing with one of his brothers and said, "I'm not going to let you get away with this. I'm going to be the one who delivers my people, and I'm going to start right now with you!" Moses did what a lot of us do—he used human means to accomplish a divine goal. He used his own orientation and perspective to go after a legitimate outcome. Moses didn't try to stop the fight. He avenged the Israelite by killing the Egyptian.

Now, I'm not quite sure what Moses' long-term plan was. I don't know if he thought he was going to deliver the Israelites one Egyptian at a time or if he was just making a point. As a highly visible member of Pharaoh's household, Moses knew that he could get attention just by standing there. That's why the Scripture points out that he "looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exodus 2:12). Feeling secure that no one had seen him, Moses must have thought he had begun the process of showing where his commitment was. He was truly the Israelites' hero, sent to deliver them from their oppression. Yet the next day, when Moses tried to stop a fight between two Israelites, they refused his help. He wasn't trying to kill them too. Moses was just saying, "Brothers, can't we all get along?"

Instead, they said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are

you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?” (Acts 7:27 NIV). One of two things must have happened the day before. Moses might not have noticed that somebody was watching. But more likely, the guy he rescued and avenged started talking.

So now Moses has two problems. First, he has just committed first-degree murder. And it *was* murder because as a respected leader, he didn't have to kill the Egyptian to stop the fight. Second, the folks he had come to help have rejected him. So Moses has two things from which to rebound. But before he even gets a chance to try, word about what he had done spreads to the Egyptians, even to Pharaoh himself. We read, “When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well” (Exodus 2:15).

So now we find Moses, a solitary fugitive, sitting by a well in the middle of a desert.

Before we go any further I want to make sure you don't check out by telling me, “But Tony, I've never killed anyone!” According to Jesus, physical murder is not the only kind of murder. That's just the obvious kind. Jesus goes so far as to say that a person should not even project anger toward another. Maybe that anger doesn't physically take a life, but it begins a process of taking things from that life.

Anger can show up in a variety of ways. It shows up when a person's character is destroyed or lessened by another person who is angry at him or her. It shows up when someone isn't able to advance at work or in a community or at church because someone else is holding them back. It can show up in the home when one spouse seeks to control or dominate the other spouse out of anger. Or a parent damages a child's esteem through angry outbursts or unrealistic expectations. Anger can show up everywhere—not just in Egypt. It does its damage in the workforce, at home, in the church, and in the community in a number of ways, attempting to take away people's opportunities and kill their potential.

So my question to you is, has your anger ever hurt or damaged

someone? If so, then from a spiritual standpoint, Moses' story applies to you too. It's really not that difficult to be considered a murderer in the kingdom of God. You might not be sitting by a well in Midian, but spiritual consequences show up in other ways.

Moses' world changed in two days, and our worlds can change just as fast.

This reminds me of an implosion I saw on the news recently. A couple of very old buildings in Dallas had been quarantined to be imploded so that builders could make room for a new building in that area. In less than 15 seconds, what had stood for years and years simply imploded and collapsed. Buildings that had taken large crews more than a year or two to build fell into a heap of rubble in less time than it probably will take for you to read this page. Life can happen that way sometimes too. Your life can be moving along without a care, and then in less than two sunsets, your whole world has fallen apart. It has collapsed, your dreams have died, and you are nowhere near where you thought you would be or where you wanted to be.

Moses went from the White House to the outhouse in just two days due to one missed shot, one miscalculation. As Moses tended those sheep in the wilderness day in and day out, I bet he looked back over his life, thinking that if he could just roll back the hands of time, he would have done things differently. He wouldn't have made *that* decision on *that* day with *that* person. He wouldn't have gone there, done that, said that, or failed to do or say one thing or another. If he could simply turn back time, he could turn things around himself. He could still live in Pharaoh's house, eat Pharaoh's food, go to Pharaoh's parties, use his Egyptian Visa card, and drive his Mercedes chariot. But now, in the desert, with Pharaoh intent on killing him, Moses no longer sees any hope for himself. He probably thinks—just as you might today—“It's too late for me. God can't use me after what I've done with my life.”

In fact, when we come to the third chapter of Exodus, Moses is 80

years old. We have read in the book of Acts that when Moses killed the Egyptian, he was 40 years old. Yet when he has his next encounter with God, he is 80 years old (Acts 7:30). That's a 40-year time-out for one bad action. But when you think about it, that isn't all too unusual. I've been a pastor for 35 years, and as a result, I have spent a considerable amount of time counseling individuals and families through trials in their lives. It's not unusual to find out that bad decisions have triggered emotional, physical, attitudinal, or relational repercussions that have played out for decades. Just as Moses' life was changed dramatically, many other people's lives have changed, and the thought keeps creeping back, "If only I hadn't..."

Friend, if you're thinking of an "If only I hadn't..." situation right now, then I want you to pay extra close attention as we continue. Because of your past, you may think it's too late for you to dream, to hope, or to live with your mojo again. But it's never too late as long as God is still in the equation. And as long as you're still here, God is still in the equation because He hasn't gone anywhere.

At 80 years old, it would have been easy for Moses to think it was too late. At 80 years old, it was probably easy for Moses to think that nothing was ever going to change. At 80 years old, no doubt Moses thought that all of his tomorrows would be like his todays and that he was forever doomed to a miserable life of shepherding his father-in-law's sheep.

But at 80 years old, everything *did* change for Moses.

We read, "Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (Exodus 3:1).

Horeb, the mountain of God, is also known as Mount Sinai. Moses is about to have the encounter of his life, and the location of this encounter is critical. Mount Sinai is where God will later give Moses the Ten Commandments. It's known as the mountain of God because it's the place of God's presence. In other words, here Moses has an encounter that will set him free from his past and give him a

brand-new future in the presence of God. Only when Moses took his flock to the mountain of God could he regain what he had lost.

If you are in a Moses-like situation and you've been living month after month or year after year with repercussions from your missed shots or wrong decisions, the first step to getting back on track is to find out what you really need.

You don't need another sermon. You don't need another Bible seminar or conference. To be honest, you don't even need another book. That doesn't mean I want you to put this one down just yet or stop going to church. Those things are good and important. But when you are in a Moses-like situation, you need a fresh encounter with God.

You need to be in God's presence. In God's presence, you're going to hear His word specifically for you rather than His general word for everyone. God explains in Joel 2:25-26 (NIV) what can happen in His presence.

I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten, the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you.

The "locusts" had taken away 40 years of Moses' life because of the decision that he had made, yet God uses those 40 years to do what Moses could have never done without them. Before the wilderness, Moses thought he could deliver the Israelites one man at a time all by himself. After the wilderness, Moses had learned to depend on God. The consequences of Moses' mistake won't be removed, and the 40 years that were lost are forever lost, but the beauty of God is that He pours the *value* of those lost years into Moses' next 40 years.

But that transfer of value happened only when Moses went to

where God was, when he encountered His presence. The same is true for you and me. God promises to restore us when we return to Him, but that means more than listening to a sermon, going to a seminar, or singing a song—it means being desperate for Him in His presence.

When God Does Something Amazing

In God's presence, Moses got a special-effects light show. We read in Exodus 3:2, "The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed." Moses experienced God's presence. In fact, "the angel of the LORD" is the preincarnate Christ, so Moses experienced God up close and personal.

You can learn a secret from this passage, a secret about how you can know when God is about to do something amazing in your life. This passage explains how you can know when God is getting ready to invade your ordinary with His extraordinary. Theologians have a fancy name for when God shows up that's taken from the early Jewish rabbis—*Shekinah*. *Shekinah*, transliterated from the Hebrew, literally means "to settle" or "to dwell." The Shekinah glory is the visible manifestation of God's presence. It's the way God makes Himself so visible to you that you *know* He is there.

Never in history have we seen God show up just to show up. When God shows up in a visible, Shekinah way, He is about to do something that will blow your mind. He invades your normal with His abnormal, creating a scenario that you can't explain. But keep in mind that when God does something that doesn't make sense, it's not supposed to make sense. There's no point in even trying to make sense of it—just watch and see God in it.

Time after time in the Bible and in subsequent history, when God was getting ready to move in a seemingly hopeless situation, He

showed up in a way that human understanding could not explain. It's important that you remember this. If you're in God's presence and you're looking for a change, then look for something that you cannot explain. God tells us in Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV), "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"

That's how different God is from you and me. He is not like us. His ways are so high that we can't even see them. One of my all-time favorite vocal groups is the Delfonics, and if God had written this in the era of soul music, He would have framed that verse this way, "Didn't I blow your mind this time, didn't I? Didn't I show up in a way that you could not explain, didn't I?"

In the situation with Moses, God showed up in a bush that was on fire but did not burn up. It would be nothing special to see a bush on fire in a hot wilderness. Stuff gets dry in the wilderness, and fires start. But when a bush is on fire and does not burn up, that's different. That's the not-normal situation that God showed up in. And when He did, Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up" (Exodus 3:3). Moses couldn't explain it, but he also couldn't ignore it. He called it a "marvelous sight," and you can bet he wanted to know what was going on with this weird bush.

And God told him. After Moses turned to look at the bush, God spoke. We read, "When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses!'" (verse 4). God didn't reveal Himself to Moses until Moses turned aside to look. A lot of us want more from God, but we haven't turned to look at what He's already doing. We want God to show up, but we haven't responded to the way He has already shown up. And then we sit and complain and wonder why we don't get more.

One of the reasons we don't get more is that God hasn't seen us doing anything with what He has already given us. When God gives

you something you have never seen before and cannot explain, don't ignore it. Turn and look for God in the midst of it because God just might be trying to reveal Himself to you at a whole new level.

This is what God did with Moses. When Moses turned aside, he heard two words: "Moses, Moses." Did God speak to him in Hebrew? Moses had been living in the desert of Midian as a foreigner for 40 years—had it been that long since he heard his name spoken in Hebrew? He'd been trapped in a wilderness for four decades with his life seemingly going nowhere, and out of a bush Moses heard God calling his name. This wasn't a general sermon or a general word for everybody. This was God talking directly to Moses because Moses' situation was so desperate that it demanded a personal word from God.

I've been preaching for nearly four decades myself, and I can no longer count the number of times someone has come up to me after a sermon that I delivered with no particular person in mind, and that individual will tell me that the sermon I just preached was meant exactly for them. In fact, just last week a lady came up to me after the sermon—someone I had never met—and she said, "Pastor, what you preached this morning was meant just for me. I was wrestling with a decision, and your sermon told me exactly what I needed to do." Now, I didn't know this lady's situation. I just preached what God had put on my heart for this particular Sunday. But when you are in God's presence, the Holy Spirit takes *the Word of God* and turns it into *a word from God* for you.

When you are sitting in a congregation, listening to a sermon on the radio or on your MP3 player, or reading a book and you feel as if you are the only one in the room or the only one this message was intended for, that's when God is calling your name... "Sarah, Sarah!" or "Keith, Keith!"

When you hear your name, do what Moses did. Moses said, "Here I am." I wish I could have been there because I doubt Moses uttered those words clearly. It was probably more of a manly grunt. He was

looking at a bush that was burning and yet not burned up. He had just heard God speak directly to him—by name. It’s a wonder that Moses was able to contain himself at all. In my Tony Evans paraphrase, he might have answered, “Me? Yeah! I’m here. Right here.”

The reason I think that has to do with what comes next. God quickly replied, “Do not come near here” (verse 5). Moses had heard his name called after a 40-year silence, and he was ready to check this thing out. But instead God stops him right in his tracks and says, “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (verse 5).

God stops Moses and tells him to take off his shoes. To take off your shoes is to identify with who you are as a human. Man was originally made from the ground. God made Adam from the dust of the ground before He breathed life into him. So essentially, all mankind has originally come from the ground. When you or I die, much of our physical body will decay and return back into the ground. Taking off his shoes reminded Moses of who he was and how high he should stand in God’s presence. Any shoe that Moses wore would have a sole on it. Even if that sole was just a quarter of an inch thick, that was still a quarter of an inch too high in God’s presence.

Not only that, but on his best day, Moses needed to be reminded that he isn’t much more than dignified dirt. Now, God can do a lot with dignified dirt, but God didn’t want Moses to “think more highly of himself than he ought to think” (Romans 12:3).

“Moses, Moses!” God called out. “I want to remind you of who you are. Take off your shoes and connect with what you are really tied to—*dirt*.” But the difference now is that this dirt is special dirt because this dirt is holy dirt. Holy dirt on holy ground is something that God can do something marvelous with.

After 40 years of leading dumb sheep through a barren wilderness, Moses probably thought it was too late to do anything significant—especially something like his long-lost dream of helping the Israelites to freedom. But Moses didn’t know that God had been preparing

him all along. First God gave him 40 years of “uptown” preparation in the luxury of Egypt. Next God gave him 40 years of “downtown” preparation in the isolation of Midian. The second 40 years of preparation came about because of Moses’ wrong choice, but that didn’t stop God from using it. Moses would need the skills he learned leading sheep in the wilderness to lead the sheep of Israel out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

The consequences that Moses suffered were no doubt painful, and the days, nights, weeks, months, and years were certainly long, but God has a unique way of turning a mess into a miracle. We learn from the life of Moses that God doesn’t always relieve the consequences or erase the pain, but He is so big that He won’t even let your mess mess Him up. He still has a plan and a calling for you. If you will seek Him, you will find it just as Moses did when God showed up in his wilderness.

But the interesting thing about the timing of Moses’ calling is that it didn’t happen until something else happened in Egypt. Keep in mind that God is never just working with you. God is always doing more than one thing at a time. God was preparing Moses in the wilderness during his 40-year hiatus, but He was also waiting on an entire nation to cry out to Him for deliverance. Essentially, Israel needed to *want* to be delivered. They were enjoying Egypt too much. But when they cried out, God spoke to Moses.

The Bible has been divided by verses and chapters in order to help us keep our place as we read it. But when the Bible was written, it didn’t have verses or chapters. Chapter 2 in Exodus closes with this:

Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered

His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them (Exodus 2:23-25).

Exodus 3 begins, “Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.”

In the original language of the Bible, there is no chapter division. When the Israelites cried out to God and God took notice of them, God showed up to Moses in a burning bush on His mountain. While God was working with Israel, He was also working with Moses to bring a broken man back to a broken nation in order to accomplish a marvelous exodus to freedom. God is always hooking stuff up.

After his 40-year detour from a missed shot, Moses went into God’s presence. He responded to God’s person. He got God’s program. And soon he will experience God’s power because when God shows up in Egypt, He will display power that Moses never knew in the desert. But even what Moses learned will be used in his calling to lead God’s people to freedom because God never wastes a thing.

Just as it wasn’t too late for God to call Moses, it’s not too late for God to redeem your situation and use you in a way you may not fathom right now. Don’t ever become satisfied with where you are in the wilderness, even if it was your mistake or sin that got you there.

God holds the all-time record for most successful rebounds, but you need to position yourself in His presence in order to see the marvelous thing He’s going to do. You need to turn and look in His direction in order for Him to call you by name and recommission you to service.

And when He does, you will have what we used to call in the old church down home a testimony. You will have a testimony, like Moses, of what God can do when it looks like there’s nothing else that can possibly be done to redeem your situation.