

25 Getting Out of Your Own Way - When We Stand in the Way of God

June 29, 2026

We are working our way through Exodus at church right now and Moses has been on my mind for the past few weeks.

Not the Moses of the parting sea or the stone tablets.

The Moses most of us skip past in a few verses.

The one who got it wrong and then spent a very long time in a desert learning some hard lessons.

Moses did not grow up poor or a slave.

He grew up in Pharaoh's household – adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, raised as royalty in the most powerful nation on earth at the time.

The finest food.

The finest education.

The finest of everything Egypt had to offer.

He was, in every worldly sense, somebody.

A Prince of Egypt.

And then something stirred in him.

His people – the Israelites – were suffering under brutal oppression.

And Moses, with all his position and all his power, decided he could help.

He was right about one thing: God did intend to use him to deliver his people.

He was wrong about pretty much everything else.

At age forty, Moses had enough and decided to do something about it.

He saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating one of his Hebrew brothers.

And he acted and killed the Egyptian taskmaster.

He buried the body, thinking he could hide what he had done.

Moses assumed his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.

The very people he thought he was saving turned on him.

The act he thought would rally his brothers revealed him as a murderer.

And Pharaoh, hearing what had happened, sought to kill him.

Moses fled.

Not to a neighboring city.

To the desert of Midian.

This was not a short jaunt, this was an epic journey some estimate over 300 miles to get as far away from Egypt as possible.

And here is the part that Scripture covers in just a few verses:

He wasn't in Midian for a few weeks or months or years.

Forty years later, God supernaturally appeared to him through a burning bush.

Forty years!

The man with the finest education in the world.

The man who thought he knew how God's plan was supposed to unfold.

Spent forty years in the desert tending someone else's sheep.

We struggle with waiting 40 days sometimes, but 40 years seems unfathomably long.

When Moses finally stood before God at the burning bush – when the moment he had perhaps dreamed about for forty years finally arrived – his response was not confidence.

It was not “finally, I've been waiting for this, took you long enough.”

It was:

“O my Lord, I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Exodus 4:10, NKJV)

The man who was once mighty in words as a prince of Egypt.

Could no longer find them.

Forty years in the desert had not just humbled Moses.

It had emptied him.

And I believe – along with many scholars who have wrestled with this passage – that this is exactly what God was waiting for.

Not a Moses who was confident in his own abilities.

Not a Moses who had a plan.

A Moses who had nothing left to offer but obedience.

Because the version of Moses who killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand was not ready.

That Moses still had too much of himself in the way.

Jesus said something that I think speaks directly to this.

In Luke 9:23 He told His disciples:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (NKJV)

We often read “deny himself” as giving something up.

Overcoming a sin in your life.

Sacrificing a comfort.

But the Greek word Jesus used is *aparneomai* – and it means something far more radical than that.

It means to disown.

To renounce.

To utterly refuse to identify with something that was once claimed as your own.

The most vivid use of this same word in the New Testament is Peter denying Jesus the night of the crucifixion.

Do you remember Peter’s response, the text implies he began to use profane language to make his point to those around him – his denial of Christ caused him to revert to his old ways in order to protect himself.

That same word – *aparneomai* – is what Jesus uses when He says deny *yourself*.

He is not asking you to give up chocolate for Lent.

He is asking you to disown the version of yourself that insists on running its own plan.

The version that sees the Egyptian beating the Hebrew and acts before God moves.

The version that thinks it knows better.

And then He adds a word that should wake us up:

Daily.

Not once.

Not at a retreat or an altar call or a significant spiritual moment.

Every single day.

Moses needed forty years to get there.

Jesus says it should be a daily practice.

That is both convicting and merciful at the same time.

I have written before about an evening at Sprague Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park.

I was there as the sun was beginning its descent behind the mountains, hoping to photograph the sunset's reflection on the water at the other side of the lake.

I had a destination in mind – a spot further along the trail I was certain would give me the perfect shot.

So I ran.

And as I ran, something kept pulling at me.

Stop.

I kept moving.

Stop.

I told myself I was almost there.

Stop.

The third time I finally listened, but I was annoyed.

I stepped off the trail and walked to the edge of the lake.

And just as I arrived at the water, the sun was dropping behind the mountains.

I stood there breathless.

Not from the running.

From what I almost missed.

Had I kept going – had I reached the destination I was so certain was the right one –

I would have missed the beauty in the moment.

And in the stillness after, God made something plain to me:

You do this all the time.

You see the direction. You assume the destination. And you run.

And while you are running toward what you think is My plan, you miss what I have along the way.

I have not forgotten that evening over thirty years ago.

I have not fully learned from it either.

Do you struggle with your will versus God's will?

Do you struggle with running ahead of God once you have some sense of His direction?

Do you struggle with the waiting... the months, the years, the decades as God patiently waits for you to finally deny yourself?

I do.

More than I would like to admit.

There is something in us – something that feels like faith but is often just impatience – that takes what God has shown us and builds a plan around it.

We decide the timeline.

We decide the method.

We decide which Egyptian needs dealing with.

And then we wonder why the people we were trying to help turn against us.

Why the thing we were so certain about collapsed.

Why we are standing in a desert we did not expect, tending sheep that are not ours.

The castle we were so eager to expand – so ready to march out from – we left vulnerable in our haste.

The interior work undone.

The storerooms we hadn't addressed still full.

Because we were too busy charging toward what we thought God wanted us to do versus what He was actually doing.

In us.

Before He could work through us.

The desert was not punishment.

I don't believe that.

The desert was preparation.

Every year Moses spent watching Jethro's sheep was a year the Prince of Egypt died a little more.

Every year the mighty orator spent in silence was a year the man who thought he knew better grew quieter.

And at the end of forty years, God had what He needed.

Not a prince.

Not a strategist.

Not a man with connections and an education and a plan.

A shepherd.

Emptied of himself.

Finally ready to be filled with something better.

The burning bush didn't appear until Moses had nothing left to offer but his availability.

And even then – even standing before God Himself – Moses still argued.

I am slow of speech.

Send someone else.

God sent him anyway. And He wants to send you, in spite of yourself, if you're willing to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him.

Because the bush wasn't burning because Moses was ready.

The bush was burning because God was ready and Moses was available.

So what does this look like on an ordinary Monday?

Not a desert.

Not a burning bush.

Just a day with decisions and impulses and that familiar pull toward acting on what we think we see.

Jesus didn't say take up your cross once and follow Him.

He said take it up **daily**.

Aparneomai.

Disown the version of yourself that has the plan figured out.

Not once.

Every morning.

Before the day has a chance to convince you that you know exactly which direction to run.

It is a small death.

Practiced daily.

That slowly, over time, makes room for something the Prince of Egypt never could have accomplished.

The shepherd who simply obeyed.

I am still learning this.

Still running toward destinations I've decided on.

Still occasionally hearing *stop* and needing it a second time.

A third time.

But I am learning.

And on the days when I actually stop –

when I step off the trail and walk to the water's edge and wait –

I am never disappointed by what God had there instead.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever desert you are in right now – God has not forgotten where you are. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of "Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage." He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler – still learning to stop when God says stop, still grateful for the sunsets he almost ran past.

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