



SAMPLE SERMON:

GOD'S ESCALATION CLAUSE

EXODUS 3:18-20, 5:1-3, 17:8-16 TNIV

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¹⁸“The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God.’ ¹⁹But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. ²⁰So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go. . . ¹Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’” ²Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.” ³Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”

Exodus 3:18-20, 5:1-3 TNIV

I never knew much about “hot” real estate markets until I moved to Metro Washington, DC, where home prices have nearly doubled in the past two years and the terribly average “single family dwelling” can easily cost over \$1 million. Those of us who move into such places from more reasonable markets experience “sticker shock” only those from similar places understand. Everyone else looks at us as though we had three heads when we agonize in their presence. So we commiserate with those who share our plight, and conversations about commonplace real estate transactions are part and parcel of the “beltway banter” we begin to take for granted.

In the corridors of Columbia, it is not uncommon to overhear young couples as they lick each others wounds after battling unsuccessfully for months to land a decent home. They talk about the ones that got away when they lost their bids to one of ten or so other families vying for the same property they wanted. I know Columbians who lose seven or eight torrid “bidding wars” before they finally get their home in neighborhoods where houses typically sell for ten to twenty percent above asking price. Truly amazing!

In a place like this at a time like this, every real estate contract has an escalation clause, an insidious little snippet of fine print stipulating that a person who wins the first round of a bidding war gains little more than the right of last refusal, the opportunity to ultimately trump successive bids higher than the first until all bidders finally cry “uncle.” It is no fun “breaking in” to a market like this!

In our culture, even those who have never darkened the door of any house of worship know the story of Moses’ calling, even if they only know the Disney-fied version. They can recount the story of the burning-bush-not-consumed theophany on the mountain, of shoes removed in recognition of the great I AM. They can tell of Moses’ God-given mission to free the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt; of Passover, plagues and parted seas; of people wandering forty years before entering the Promised Land. What is often missed even by the most devout and knowledgeable Bible-believers, I find, is the escalation clause in God’s covenant calling of Moses, who apparently got far more than he bargained for.

Were I to ask you what, exactly, God called Moses to ask of Pharaoh, you would probably tell me, “Let my people go!” You might even sing the phrase if you grew up in Sunday and Vacation Bible schools. And no matter how well you

spoke or sang, you would be wrong, or at least partially so. What God actually asked of Moses in the beginning was that he lead the Hebrew people on a three-day pilgrimage into the wilderness to celebrate a sacrificial festival of worship. Even this task seemed impossible to Moses, of course, who complained of his ineloquence and generally doubted he could be the right man for the job. What if Moses had understood that God really intended to deliver his people from slavery entirely? What if Moses had known about the escalation clause?

God was not making the story up as He went along, of course, and He knew full well that Pharaoh would refuse to sign even Moses' simple request for leave. My own conjecture is that God knew Moses could not handle the entirety of His bold plan were it revealed all at once. Moses finally said, "Yes" to the smaller thing—which seemed big enough to him at the time—and God exercised His covenant escalation clause, just as he planned. By the time he realized the story that God was really writing, Moses was boldly leading God's people through parted waters and away from Egypt forever.

At least in my limited experience and casual observations of other called-out persons' stories, God almost always works in this way. Like Isaiah in the temple, we say, "Here am I, LORD, send me," before we realize the full scope of God's plan. By the time we realize the magnitude of our mission, we are encamped like Moses with God's people between Pharaoh's army and a rising sea awaiting God's deliverance. It is too late to turn back, and God's faithfulness in the "little things" has already taught us to trust that He will come through. When we signed the contract and answered the call, we agreed to the escalation clause.

My own ministry has been filled with missions I never really knew I undertook until I found myself in the thick of the battle, doing things I might never have been bold enough to undertake in the beginning but would not have missed for anything. The most thrilling callings of my life have come in theophanies barely understood until after some "mission accomplished" moments years later. I have come to realize that God's escalation clause is one of His greatest gifts to His people, a way of drawing them into thrilling adventures they might never begin if they knew how truly big God's "asks" really are. We wind up doing things we thought we never could in response to callings we never fully understood in order to grow closer to the God we can never fully know. What a thrill!

As a student at the University of Richmond bound for law school, I said "Yes" to pastoral ministry in the local church when a group of youth I served challenged me to practice what I preached and stop running from God's clarion call (at least it was clarion to them). I look back on that watershed moment in my life and realize that I had no clue what I was saying "Yes" to. That's a good thing, to be honest, because I realize I might have said, "No" if I knew then how big God's ask would become in my life. I signed the contract, and it contained an escalation clause.

When God called me to a struggling church in downtown Lynchburg, Virginia, for example, I never realized how difficult, or how thrilling the turnaround mission would be. I just said "Yes," whatever I thought that meant at the time. By the time I realized how truly big God's ask really was, I was already engaged in a thrilling adventure with God's people. Had I known how hard it would be, I might not have said yes (though I would like to think I would), but I would not have missed those eight-and-a-half years for anything in the world. I learned more about God and about myself in those years than I had in the entirety of my life prior. I signed a contract, and it contained an escalation clause.

Likewise, when I left that beloved congregation to say "Yes!" to God's call to Northern Virginia, I could not possibly know all that was being asked of me. Now that I am beginning to realize the enormity of God's ask in this situation—a mission for which I again feel inadequate—I am too far into a great adventure to turn back now. I wake up every day thrilled to see what God will do next, how much bigger the ask will turn out to have been. Good God, what if I had said, "No" to you? What if I ever say "No" to you? I signed the contract, and it contained an escalation clause.

The greatest thing about God's escalation clause is that He provides everything and everyone that is needed as the mission gets more difficult. My favorite portion of the Moses chronicles picks up the story after the fullness of God's plan has begun to unfold. Moses has led the Hebrew people deep into the wilderness, and they are being asked to do real battle for the first time:

⁸The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. ⁹Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." ¹⁰So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. ¹¹As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. ¹²When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. ¹³So Joshua

overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. ¹⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.” ¹⁵Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. ¹⁶He said, “Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD, the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.”
Exodus 17:8-16 TNIV

This is the first we know of young Joshua, the warrior who will become Moses' closest lieutenant and ultimately lead God's people into the "land flowing with milk and honey." Moses' role is changing now as the complexity of the mission increases. He has become the visionary leader of the people who calls others to lead alongside him, just as God first called him.

I love the picture of Moses at the top of the hill enabling God's people to win the battle by holding the symbol of God's presence, the rod, aloft. First, it seems to me that there is a subtle comedy in this picture. Can you imagine Moses figuring out that every time his arms grow tired and he lowers the staff, the battle turns against the Hebrews? I imagine the battle shifting to and fro as Moses does his best to keep the vision aloft by his own power and becoming hopelessly tired in the process. Silly old Moses! And I think of the number of times that I have stupidly tried to keep the church's vision aloft by my own power as God exercised His escalation clause and the mission became more and more complex.

The portrait of a learning Moses is so beautifully painted in Exodus 17 that I have considered commissioning an artist to render it on canvas for my study. It's the picture of a pastor, a visionary leader, who has said "Yes" to God and now finds himself in the midst of an escalated adventure. He is growing weary, because he never realized that so much would be asked of him, and he is still trying to hold the vision aloft by himself, doing things the way he has always done them before, the way he thought he had been called to do them. The people are depending on him, as is Joshua, his chosen lieutenant.

Just as he is about to "give out," a grace gift is given and a lesson taught by Aaron and Hur, who put Moses in his place on a rock and stand on either side of him to hold his hands and the staff aloft. Is this not one of the most meaningful images of visionary leadership in all of God's Word? The entire experience leads Moses to trust God even more, especially in the face of an escalating mission. Moses marks the spot as sacred so that he will never forget what he learned there. When the mission escalates beyond our initial sense of the call, God always brings others alongside the leader to help hold the vision aloft. This is YAHWEH-Nissi, "The LORD is My Banner," as Moses named it. It is God who makes the victory possible, who ultimately meets the demands of His call, and the battle belongs to Him alone.

So that which my pastor/grandfather always said is so true: "God does not call the equipped, He equips the called." Moreover, God often calls us to smaller missions that lead to bigger things, and this is for our own good. It allows us to say "Yes" without reservation, to grow as the mission grows, to learn on the journey to trust God and our sisters and brothers in Christ, to become along with them more than any of us thought we could be in God's Kingdom. His covenant escalation clause is a rich gift God gives to those He calls out, to those who say, "Here am I, LORD, send me!" before they even understand fully where, when, or why they are being sent.

If I live and serve in Metro DC for another quarter century—and that is what I believe I have been called to do—I will never love the escalation clauses in real estate contracts that push the people I love and serve to their financial limits. But God, I love the escalation clause in your covenant calling! It takes us places I never thought we could go, to accomplish things I never thought we could do, to be people I never thought we could be, to love each other like I never thought we could love, to know things about God I never thought we could know. We say, "Yes, Lord!" Now, what was the calling?

The day we decided to follow Jesus Christ, we signed a contract. Thank God it contained an escalation clause!