

## THE ROD OF GOD

### EXODUS 4:1-5, 20

Exodus 4:1-5, “Then Moses answered and said, “But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’” So the LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A rod.” And He said, “Cast it on the ground.” So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out your hand and take it by the tail” (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand), that they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”

Verse 20, “Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took **the rod of God** in his hand.”

*Have you notice how humans get attached to certain objects?* If you’re a fan of the Peanuts Comic Strip you know that Charlie Brown’s best friend, Linus, always carried his security blanket. For thirty years Linus Van Pelt toted his blanket around. It was an **attachment**.

When my kids were little we had a stuffed animal they passed on to one another. They named him, “Dog-dog.” There was no going to sleep if they couldn’t cuddle with Dog-dog. They were definitely attached.

Watch a carpenter, he has a favorite hammer... A surgeon has his scalpel... Guitarists often name their guitars. BB King called his “Lucille,” after running back into a burning dance hall to save it from a blazing fire...

Baseball players are notorious for getting attached to their glove... All Star, Angels’ outfielder, Torri Hunter, who won nine consecutive gold gloves for his fielding prowess, always gave his glove a female name. “Coco,” “Sheila,” “Susan” were names he used. He treated his gloves as if it had its own personality. Hunter never let his glove sit in the dirt, and rarely let it out of his sight. He would oil and lubricate the leather.

Former Oakland A’s infielder, Mike Gallego, left his glove in the clubhouse at Candlestick Park during the 1989 World Series earthquake, yet when he realized he’d forgotten his one-of-a-kind, prized mitt, Gallego risked his life to run back into the stadium to retrieve his glove... Ballplayers definitely get attached to their gloves. It’s not *a love affair*, they call it “*a glove affair*.”

But you can get attached to anything - a pair of old, dogged shoes, you wear them long after they've worn out... Or a set of dirty work clothes, you have to hide from your wife to keep them from getting tossed into the trash... You can even get attached to a chair - it's stained and threadbare - *but it's **your** special chair!*...

Certain objects are just sticky. We get use to them, to the point where it's hard to let them go, and *we become attached*... ***What are your attachments?***

Moses had an attachment - a rod or shepherd's staff. He probably picked it up shortly after moving from the banks of the Nile to the wilderness of Midian. He went to work for Jethro, his father-in-law, a sheepherder.

Moses' Egyptian feet weren't use to Midian's rocky terrain. He needed a staff to balance himself on the mountainsides, so he found a young, sturdy tree. He cut it down, and whittled it into a rod. If it was like the average shepherd's staff, it was thick and straight and strong, probably six feet long, with a hook on the end.

Over the forty years Moses tended sheep in Midian, he grew attached to his rod. He used it to scale and sturdy himself on steep mountain cliffs while searching for lost sheep. He leaned on it in the hot summer sun. He used it to fight off wild animals or beat back thick brush. His rod pulled sheep out of hard-to-get-to nooks and crannies - even used it to correct his sheep dogs. Everywhere Moses went, his staff was at his side.

It was not uncommon for shepherds to have the same staff for a lifetime. To Moses his rod was more than a stick, or a staff - *it was his best friend*. It had helped him out of many a tough spot. If he was given the opportunity, Moses probably would've insisted on being buried with that rod. His staff was an attachment.

*This evening I brought my rod!* (**driver**) It's not quite six feet long, and rather than a hook on the end, it has a club head... This is not one of those fancy, state-of-the-art titanium drivers my sons use. My rod is vintage. I've hit towering shots with it now for fifteen years.

I've tried the new and improved drivers with the kryptonite shafts. They boast the latest technology. I've played with those expensive drivers, *but they just don't feel right*. **I'm attached to mine**. I like to call it, "*Old Faithful*." When I get to be an elderly man - *many many years from now* - I'll likely still be golfing with my rod!

But here's the difference between *my rod* and *Moses' rod*... *A true shepherd never throws down his rod*. And I admit, I've thrown down mine a time or two. In a moment of frustration it's easy to let a golf club fly.

Once I was playing golf, and I came to a green surrounded by a lake. Like most amateur golfers I reached into my bag and pulled out an old ball - just in case I hit it in

the water. But at that moment I heard a voice from heaven, "Use a new ball." I concluded, "Wow, maybe I'll hit a good shot." I dropped a new ball on the ground, and took a practice swing. Then I heard the voice again, "On second thought, use the old ball."

Hear about the golfers annoyed by the slow play of the twosome in front of them. One of the offenders was wandering in the middle of the fairway - while his partner just sat in the cart. The waiting golfers were steamed, one shouted to the guy in the cart, "Why don't you help your partner find his ball?" The man replied, "He's got his ball. He's looking for his club!"

Yes, I hate to confess, but I've thrown down my rod a time or two. Yet Moses would've never thrown down his rod. A shepherd without a rod is defenseless. A staff-less shepherd is vulnerable and stripped of his strength! Moses would've never, ever given up his rod.

Yet that is exactly what God asks him to do! Chapter 3 tells us Moses is standing shoeless on Mount Horeb, in front of a bush that's on fire, yet not consumed. God is in this burning bush, and He tells Moses to take off his shoes, he's standing on holy ground. Moses is worried the Hebrew people won't believe God has spoken to him and sent him to Egypt to free them. That's when in Exodus 4:2, "The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" (And Moses) said, "A rod."

Now understand, it's not that God didn't know what was in Moses' hand! God is all-knowing. God certainly knows a rod when He sees one. The problem is that Moses didn't know what was in his hand. He saw his rod as a simple shepherd's staff, but God had plans for this rod. In God's hands it would be so much more.

When Moses answers God, he says "A rod." Literally the Hebrew word is "a dead stick." Moses had found this branch and carved it into a staff. For years he'd used it to shepherd Jethro's sheep. Moses knew this rod, oh so well! He knew it's knots... the place he liked to grip it, smoothed out by the friction of his hand... he knew the thick portion he used to fight off predators...

Over the years Moses had gotten to know this rod so well, he didn't know it all... Moses saw an everyday, a-million-like-it, a-run-of-the-mill rod... but God saw in it the potential to overcome an evil empire and to free a enslaved nation. And God is about to show Moses that what he thinks is just a dead stick, is in reality a mighty, miracle-working instrument when surrendered to Him.

Verse 3, And (God) said, "Cast it on the ground." So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it." Moses took his rod and threw it on the ground (throw down my golf club). And when he did his staff became a snake.

Moses jumped back and ran! And if my club turned into one of those new Cobra drivers, well... No, I probably would've run from it too!

Moses obviously didn't like snakes. If Moses was like me he'd tell you there are only two kinds of snakes, and we're not talking poisonous and nonpoisonous, we're talking dead and alive. Hey, I hate all snakes.

Moses though was a shepherd from the Midianite desert. He was an outdoorsman, and I'm sure he was use to snakes. Moses fled from this rod turned snake probably because it became a venomous snake. Some Bible scholars believe this snake was a cobra. In fact, the crown worn by the Egyptian Pharaoh was shaped like a coiled-up cobra. It was the Pharaoh's insignia.

But God is not through challenging Moses, verse 4, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand and take it by the tail...'" Realize, the snake charmers of Egypt handled snakes, but they always picked them up behind the head. A snake is nothing but muscle. Grab it by the tail and it'll twist around and strike you.

If you've ever watched an episode of Swamp People (aw, a good ole Southern show), the cajuns will tell you, you pick up a snake at the back of the head. Reaching for its tail is hazardous to your health. Yet God tells Moses specifically, to "take it by the tail."

And somehow Moses musters the faith to do so. "(He reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand)." God gave Moses power to tame the serpent, just as He would to subdue the cobra called Egypt and Pharaoh. It was symbolic. The Hebrews would understand, and accept Moses as their deliverer.

But that's not the only symbolism in this story. Before Moses threw down his staff it belonged to him. It was Moses' attachment, but once he threw it down; then picked it up again, a change occurred. Read verse 20, when Moses and his family leave for Egypt, we're told, "Moses took the rod of God in his hand." What had once been the rod of Moses was now the rod of God!

Follow Moses to Egypt, and it's amazing what God and Moses will accomplish with this rod. Moses throws it down again in the palace to display God's power, and the same miracle occurs. And when Egypt's sorcerers duplicate the feat, and turn their staffs into snakes, God one ups them. His snake swallows their snakes.

God tells Moses to use the rod to strike the Nile River and turn it into blood. Listen to all that the rod of God accomplishes in Egypt... Exodus 8:5, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up on the land of Egypt.'" Exodus 8:16, "So the LORD said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your rod, and strike the dust of the land, so that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.'" Exodus

9:23, "And Moses stretched out his rod toward heaven; and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire darted to the ground." Exodus 10:13, "So Moses stretched out his rod over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind on the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts." Over and over and over again God used this rod to humble the mighty Egyptians and their Pharaoh.

And when the Hebrews get trapped between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army we're told (Exodus 14:16), God tells Moses, "But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry ground..." And the sea parts.

Even after manipulating the Red Sea, God *continued* to use this rod to work His miracles. The Amalekites were defeated when Moses raised his rod in battle... He brought water from the rock by striking it with this rod... Moses' authority is vindicated by God when this same rod blossoms with almonds... All this comes from one whittled on piece of dead wood... mind-boggling!

It would be like me picking up this rod (**my golf club on the ground**) and at the next Calvary Chapel men's golf fellowship using it to hit mighty, miraculous shots. "Give me a birdie... Oh, I eagled that hole... Or look at that, put me down for a hole-in-one. You'd all say, **it's no longer the rod of Sandy, it's now the rod of God.**

Like my golf club, the shepherd's staff that belonged to Moses, was not much before he threw it down. His rod was just a lifeless stick, an uprooted sapling. It was limited in its power and proficiency to the muscle and skill of Moses - but once he laid it down, and dedicated it to God, it became a miracle-working instrument.

The instant that staff became **God's rod** it was no longer limited to the might or talent of Moses, it was now connected to God's omnipotence. And through this seemingly insignificant stick God humbled the most powerful king on earth, broke the back of the greatest empire, and wiped out an unbeatable army.

And here's my question to you, "**What is that in your hand?**" For no matter how little, or meager your talents and resources might be - no matter how lifeless you feel - no matter how roughed-out and worn down you've become - if you give God what you have, He can do incredible and miraculous works through you!

I've got a poem entitled, "**Ten Little Christians,**" "Ten little Christians standing in line. One disliked the pastor, then there were nine. Nine little Christians stayed up very late. One overslept Sunday, then there were eight. Eight little Christians on their way to Heaven. One took the low road, then there were seven. Seven little Christians chirping like chicks. One disliked the church's music, then there were six.



Six little Christians seemed very much alive, but one lost his interest, then there were five. Five little Christians pulling for Heaven's Shore, but one stopped to rest, then there were four. Four little Christians each busy as a bee. One got his feelings hurt, then there were three. Three little Christians thought they knew what to do. One joined the worldly crowd, then there were two. Two little Christians, our rhyme is nearly done, differed from each other, then there was one.

*One little Christian* can't do much is true, brought his friend to Bible study, then there were two. Two earnest Christians, each won one more. That doubled the number, then there were four. Four sincere Christians believed God is great. Each won another, then there were eight. Eight committed Christians if they doubled as before, in just so many Sundays, we'd have 1,024.

In this little jingle, there is a lesson that is true, you belong either to **the building** or **the wrecking crew**!

In the coming days, don't you want to do something for God that'll count for eternity? Don't you want to *build up* rather than *tear down*? It's been said, "To have God do His own work through us, even once, is better than a lifetime of human striving." Rather than be a wrecking ball, why not build something great for God?

And here's where it begins, "*Men, what is that in your hand?*" God has given you gifts, talents, abilities, hobbies, money, careers, opportunity - and He's given them to you for a bigger purpose than you realize.

God knows what's in your hand, *but do you?* He wants to take what you consider a *dead stick, no big deal, how could God use that* - and with it build His kingdom and bring Him glory, *there's just one problem!*

Our problem is the same as the problem God had with Moses' rod - **it was Moses' rod**. As long as it was the rod of Moses it was limited to what Moses could accomplish with it, but when Moses threw it down, and relinquished ownership, that's when God got a hold of that rod, *and everything changed!* Once it became **God's rod** it took on a supernatural strength and skill.

Many of us suffer from the same limited assumption, "*What can God accomplish with me? My talents aren't refined, my gifts aren't all that polished, my abilities are mediocre. I'm nothing more than a dead stick.*"

Hey, realize the staff God used to conquer the Egyptians had the same chemical composition and molecular structure as it did when Moses used it to balance on rocks and tend sheep. It was the same rod.

The only thing that ever changed was it's ownership, *yet it was its ownership that made all the difference!*

This was hammered home to me in my last year of college. I took a course in public speaking. In the class we were required to do three speeches. And the professor made it clear... **we could talk about anything, but sex, politics, or religion.** My first two speeches were duds. They both were on some inane, boring topic. And they left me with a “C+”. I knew I needed to do well on my final speech if I wanted to get a “B” in the course.

But the Lord was nudging me. I knew He wanted me to share the Gospel. And I wrestled, *“But Lord, I really need a good grade, and this professor already said, “No, religious speeches.” If I violate his rule I might blow my grade.”* I went back and forth, back and forth, until finally, I just threw it down. I turned the ownership of my grades over to Jesus, and prepared my speech.

I’ll never forget taking my seat after I’d finished. There was a long pause from the professor. He rarely commented on the speeches, but this time he stood up and addressed the class, **“At the beginning of the quarter I said no speeches on sex, politics, and religion. Well, that was a religious speech, but if all religious speeches were done in that manner I would want to hear them.”** I looked at my grade, and he’d given me a 50 out of a possible 50. The highest grade he handed out all quarter. I left the room praising God!

And God taught me a big lesson that day. The *rod of Sandy* was capable of no better than a “C+”. It was the *rod of God* that hit a home run. Guys, there is no limited to what God can do with our “*little bit*” if we give it all to Him. He can take our five loaves and two fish and feed 5000. **It all boils down to ownership!**

Here’s the key to God’s blessing... Before you take it up, first throw it down, yield it to God, relinquish your claim to whatever it is, make it God’s property. It’s only when you turn it over to Him, that He uses it fully!

Francis Shaeffer once wrote, **“Much can come from the little if the little is truly consecrated to God. There are no little people and no big people in the true spiritual sense - only consecrated and unconsecrated people.”** Have you dedicated your talents and abilities and likes and proclivities to the Lord? Does Jesus have ownership of all that you are, and all that you possess?

Several weeks ago our worship leader taught us a new song. I really like it. Here’s the lyrics... **“If anything I do doesn’t bring glory to You, Lord I surrender... If anything I own, it isn’t yours and yours alone, Lord I surrender...”** Have you taken what’s in your hand, thrown it down, and surrendered it to God? For only when God owns it, will you see how greatly He’ll use it!

It's interesting, when you throw your rod down before God, it too will turn into an ugly, venomous snake. In Scripture the serpent is a symbol, not only of Egypt's Pharaoh, but of the power behind him, or Satan.

And when we dedicate ourselves, and our gifts to God, we suddenly see how selfishly we once handled them. At the time, we didn't realize how egotistical we were. We took natural abilities given by God, and used them to gratify our own ego. We defined ourselves and took our identity from the gifts God gave us, without sensing an obligation to the One who gave us the gifts.

We took skills and abilities, made possible by God's blessing, and used them to prosper ourselves. We took His tokens of grace and used them on our selfish-selves, without ever stopping to even say thanks...

*Have we robbed God?* When you take blessings and talents and advantages you did nothing to deserve, and use them on yourself - without ever pausing to praise God or serve God with what He's given - that's grand larceny in it's ugliest, most poisonous form.

Remember, the shepherd staff of Moses was an attachment, and attachments are difficult to throw down. *When you possess an object for a long time often that object will begin to possess you!* So much of ourselves, our ego, our self-esteem - gets wrapped up in our talents and abilities. I clutch tightly to **my rod**.

Often we're afraid to throw it down; for when we dedicate a talent to God we feel like we're giving up a part of ourselves we may never get back! *If I give God control of this area of my life, He may take it away...*

**And even more likely** when you lay down a piece of yourself at God's feet He'll want you to leave it alone for a time - *maybe even run from it like Moses*. It's too ugly and dangerous to pick back up so soon. It's too laced with self and pride for you to touch it until God works in you the proper attitude toward whatever it is...

But here's what I've discovered, **there may come a time when God will tell you to pick it up again!** After He changes you, *and replaces your fear with trust, and sight with faith, and pride with humility, and selfishness with service;* then God will tell you to reach down and pick it back up. And when you do, what was once lethal, will be an instrument of God.

As I was growing up my attachment was sports. I played it all - baseball, football, basketball, even golf. It was my identity. I ate, and drank, and slept sports.

That is, until I gave my life to Jesus, and got serious with God, and He told me to throw it down. *Eventually I did it, but it was hard*. So much of myself, and my pride, and my self-esteem were wrapped up in how well I could perform. I was afraid if I threw it down, perhaps God would never allow me to pick it up again.



It's so difficult to throw down what for years has defined you and bolstered your self-esteem. To throw down what we think we need is difficult. *But we'll never learn that God alone can carry us, if we're still leaning on the crutches of this world?* This is why a misplaced dependence can be an ugly affront to our mighty God.

And this can occur with any number of things, *even good, wholesome things*. Stuff gets a grip on us and overwhelms our devotion to God. A business, a relationship, an ambition, a talent, a hobby, a new home... all can become unhealthy attachments, and rob God of what He wants most, *our hearts!* This is why the way to revive your commitment to God is to throw down whatever it is you love and care for more.

**And for a time,** after I threw down my attachment, I ran from it, like Moses ran from that snake. Sports had become an idol to me, a cobra. For several years I didn't pick up a ball. *Didn't even watch the Bulldogs or Braves.* Sports had become more than a pastime - *it scared me that it had gotten such a hold on me.* I really wanted to belong to Jesus, not the gods of competition.

And it was ironic to discover that what was so difficult to throw down, was just as hard to pick back up. *When you throw down a talent or an ability it's an attachment. But when you go to pick it back up its become a snake.* Often, we don't realize what an unhealthy hold it had on us until you've walk away from it for a while.

Sports were in my past. I was afraid to make them a part of my future. When you've been bit, it's tough to muster the courage to take the snake by the tail.

You have to have faith that God can now manage what *you* were never able to control... **Yet after a time,** after the Holy Spirit did His work in my heart - God told me to pick it up again, and I did... Now I can compete without selling my soul. I can enjoy, without getting prideful. I can have fun, then walk away. I now know my value isn't based on my performance or that of my team. Today, my life is centered on who I am in Christ.

In fact, when I picked sports back up again God took my athletic interest and prowess, and used it as a tool for Him. I coached my kids, which got me involved in the community. In fact, our congregation grew from the people I met coaching their kids in Little League.

Even today, you can go through our sanctuary on a Sunday morning, and I can point out the folks who saw me as "coach" long before they made me their "pastor."

Today, I even play golf and look for opportunities to be a witness for Jesus. My goal is no longer to *beat anybody*, but rather to *point everybody* to Him. (Pick up the club) *Sandy's rod doesn't hit many miracle shots, but if I use it correctly it can still be a rod for God!*

For me it was sports, but for you it may be some other attachment... **What is that in YOUR hand?**

Maybe it's music, in this group you might expect it to be. I've known musicians who held tightly to *their music*! Rather than *God's gift* it became *their music*. Musical ability can be a source of self-identity and self-esteem. It can become an unhealthy attachment.

Or your attachment could be some other hobby, or a relationship, or a business, or the dream of your own business - whatever it is, it's got a hold on you. It's an attachment that God is calling you to throw down. He wants you to surrender it to Him - and in His time, He'll tell you to pick it back up again. And when you do, it will no longer be your's... it will now belong to God.

It reminds me of the grandma I heard of who takes her sewing skills, and dedicates them to God, and now watches Him use her to fashion blankets for homeless victims... Or the businessman in our church who takes his aptitude for numbers, finances and budgets, and gives them to God, by sharing his knowledge with single moms struggling to make ends meet... Or the mechanic who recently donated an oil change to the Christmas auction, to raise money for our missionaries.

And we are so thankful for the musicians and singers who have picked back up their gifts and talents and are now using them for God's glory rather than their own.

These are all examples of common folk with simple skills who are making a difference in people, for God's kingdom, **because they've taken what was in their hand**, and surrendered it to God... and He's using it!

My invitation tonight is two-fold... I want you to ask God two questions... **First, what is the rod that He wants you to throw down?** The talent, or skill, or resource you say you possess, but really possesses you? It's God's gift! Don't think for a second you achieved it yourself. God made it possible. He gave you the wherewithal to cultivate it or accumulate it. It belongs to God, now He asking you to throw it down.

**And second, what is the rod that He wants you to pick up...** the talent, or skill, or aptitude you've been neglecting. It's a gift from God that you buried long ago! You've relegated it to the past, when God wants to use it now and in the future. Stop being afraid of the serpent. Trust Jesus, and bravely pick it up by the tail.

Could it be God wants to use whatever it is that's in your hand? Like the rod of Moses, your simple, shepherd's staff can work wonders for God's kingdom.

What you have to offer may be small, seemingly insignificant, hardly worth throwing down, even dead in your hands - **but it's all an issue of ownership!** If what you have

belongs to God, then He'll multiply it! He'll link it to His omnipotence, and use it powerfully! *Tonight, let's take **our rod** and turn it into **God's rod**!*

Let's bow our heads and close our eyes...

If you have something God wants you to surrender to Him I want you to stand... *If there's something in your life that God has pointed out to you. It's become an unhealthy attachment, and it's time to throw it down. I'd like to pray for you that **you'll do just that tonight...***

And if there's a rod on the ground in your life tonight that you need to pick back up, you should stand... I know it was a snake, but God wants to turn it back into a rod and use it! **I'd like to pray that you'll have the faith and courage to pick it up back up again...**