

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 4

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 4 is the concluding movement of the burning bush encounter that began in Exodus 3, and it resolves the theophany not in triumph but in tension. Moses raises three successive objections to his divine commission: the people will not believe him (vv. 1–9), he lacks eloquence (vv. 10–12), and finally, in naked reluctance, he simply asks God to send someone else (vv. 13–17). To each objection God responds — not with rebuke alone but with provision: three authenticating signs (staff-to-serpent, leprous hand, water-to-blood), the promise of divine speech-enablement, and the appointment of Aaron as spokesman. The LORD's anger flares at Moses's final evasion, yet even that anger does not rescind the commission — it supplies a co-laborer instead. Moses departs, receives Jethro's blessing, and is met by the LORD on the road in a terrifying episode in which the LORD seeks to kill him (vv. 24–26) — resolved only by Zipporah's urgent circumcision of their son. The chapter closes with Moses and Aaron's arrival in Egypt, their presentation of the signs before the elders, and the people's believing, worshiping response (vv. 27–31).

This Text — Intent

God is confronting the reader's most persistent form of unbelief: the conviction that the inadequacy of the instrument disqualifies the commission. Moses's objections are not merely ancient biography — they are a mirror. Through the encounter, God is demonstrating that the commission does not rest on Moses's competence, credibility, courage, or eloquence. It rests on the LORD's identity and initiative. The terrifying road episode with Zipporah reinforces this: the one called to lead Israel in covenant faithfulness cannot himself remain in covenant negligence. God intends to produce in the reader a settled reckoning with the fact that divine calling bypasses human qualification — and simultaneously that the God who calls demands covenant consistency from those He sends.

Subject Sentence: God qualifies and equips the one He calls, overriding every objection with sovereign provision.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of human inadequacy-protest with this text: the one He sends does not need to be sufficient — He is. But the same God who overrides every objection about competence will not overlook covenant negligence in the one He has called.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Meaning of the Three Signs (vv. 1–9)

Some interpreters read the three signs primarily as apologetic credentials — proof-tokens supplied to make Moses persuasive to a skeptical audience. While this is not wrong, it underreads the text. The signs are not merely rhetorical aids; they are small-scale enactments of the LORD’s sovereignty over creation and over Egypt. The staff becomes a serpent — the serpent being the dominant symbol of Pharaonic power (the *uraeus* on Pharaoh’s crown). The leprous hand is healed at the LORD’s command — life and death, clean and unclean, belong to Him. Water becomes blood — anticipating the first plague. These signs are not merely *for* the audience; they are performed first in Moses’s own presence to address his unbelief. The apologetic function is real but secondary. The primary function is to demonstrate to Moses himself that the LORD controls what Moses fears most.

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart (v. 21)

Verse 21 introduces — for the first time in Exodus — the motif of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, here *before* the plagues begin. This is a flash-forward, not a causal sequence. Arminian and Wesleyan readings typically emphasize that Pharaoh first hardens his own heart (Exodus 7–9) before God confirms that hardening — and they use this to preserve libertarian human freedom. The observation about the sequence is textually accurate and worth noting. However, the text of verse 21 will not support reading the divine hardening as merely reactive or permissive — God says “*I will harden his heart*” as a declarative purpose-statement, not as a conditional response. The Reformed reading, corroborated by Romans 9:17–18, holds that God’s hardening of Pharaoh is an act of judicial sovereignty — God actively confirming Pharaoh in the direction Pharaoh has already chosen, for the purpose of displaying His own glory. Neither reading should collapse into fatalism (Pharaoh is morally responsible throughout) or into mere foreknowledge (God is genuinely at work in Pharaoh’s will, not merely observing it). The Reformed reading best accounts for the full canonical treatment and for the text’s own declarative grammar.

The Attack on Moses at the Inn (vv. 24–26)

This is one of the most exegetically contested passages in the Pentateuch. The main interpretive questions are: Who sought to kill whom? (The text says “the LORD met him and sought to put him to death” — most naturally Moses, though some argue it is the uncircumcised son.) Why? And what does Zipporah’s act accomplish?

The most grammatically and contextually coherent reading: the LORD threatened Moses’s life because Moses had not circumcised his son — a direct violation of the Abrahamic covenant sign (Genesis 17:14, “that soul shall be cut off from his people”). The one commissioned to lead Israel out of Egypt in covenant renewal cannot himself be living in

covenant breach. Zipporah's act is an act of urgent, if resentful, covenant compliance — her words (“you are a bridegroom of blood to me”) suggest the circumcision was a point of domestic conflict, perhaps reflecting Midianite custom. Once the circumcision is performed, the threat recedes.

Dispensational readings sometimes struggle with this passage because the sharp Israel/Church hermeneutical divide makes it difficult to feel the weight of covenant sign-keeping for New Testament believers. The passage's force, however, is not about circumcision as a permanent ritual obligation — it is about this: the God who calls does not suspend His covenant requirements for those He commissions. Covenant consistency is not optional for covenant leaders. This applies in full force to gospel ministers, elders, and all who lead God's people.

Some have argued (following certain patristic readings) that the passage is a Christophany — an angel or the pre-incarnate Christ is the one who attacks Moses. While Exodus 3 does involve the Angel of the LORD, chapter 4 uses *YHWH* directly, and there is no textual signal that a mediating figure is in view here. The plain reading is preferred.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 17:9–14** — The covenant of circumcision established with Abraham: “any uncircumcised male... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” This passage is the direct covenant background for Exodus 4:24–26. The severity of the road episode is unintelligible without it.
- **1 Corinthians 1:26–29** — “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” The divine principle that governs Exodus 4 — God choosing and qualifying the inadequate — is given its fullest New Testament theological statement here. Moses is an instance of a pattern; Paul names the pattern.
- **Romans 9:17–18** — “For this purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth... he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” Directly cites Exodus and grounds the hardening of Pharaoh in divine sovereignty, providing the canonical warrant for the Reformed reading of verse 21.
- **Jeremiah 1:4–10** — Jeremiah's call narrative is structurally parallel to Moses's: divine commission, protest of inadequacy (“I do not know how to speak; I am only a youth”), divine reassurance (“I will be with you”), and divine enablement (“I have put my words in your mouth”). God's response to Jeremiah's objection is the same as His response to Moses — the commission does not wait on the readiness of the instrument.

- **2 Corinthians 12:9–10** — “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” The theological logic of Exodus 4 reaches its sharpest New Testament expression here: the weakness of the instrument is not an obstacle to God’s power — it is the condition under which His power is most clearly displayed.

Aim: To confront every form of inadequacy-protest in the reader with the sovereign sufficiency of the God who calls — and to show that the same God who equips for service demands covenant faithfulness from those He sends.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Moses raises first objection: “They will not believe me or listen to my voice”	Objection is anticipatory — he assumes rejection before it happens
2–5	Sign 1: Staff becomes serpent, then restored; “that they may believe that the LORD appeared to you”	Serpent = <i>uraeus</i> , symbol of Pharaonic authority; LORD reclaims it
6–8	Sign 2: Hand becomes leprous, then healed	Life and death, clean and unclean, belong to the LORD
9	Sign 3 announced: Water from the Nile will become blood if the first two signs are refused	Anticipates Plague 1; escalating severity of signs
10	Moses raises second objection: “I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech and tongue”	Even after witnessing the signs, Moses persists in self-focused inadequacy
11–12	God answers: “Who has made man’s mouth?... I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak”	God claims sovereignty over human capacity — the Creator will speak through the creature
13	Moses’s third and final objection: “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else”	Naked reluctance — no longer an argument, only refusal
14–17	The LORD’s anger burns; Aaron appointed as	Anger does not rescind the commission; provision is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	spokesman; Moses will be “as God” to Aaron	made without retreat
18	Moses returns to Jethro, requests permission to return to Egypt	Covenant family integrity maintained; Jethro blesses the departure
19	The LORD confirms it is safe to return — those seeking Moses’s life are dead	Divine timing and protection over Moses’s return
20	Moses departs with wife, sons, and the staff of God	The staff is now named “the staff of God” — its identity has been transformed
21	The LORD previews the mission: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart”	First occurrence of hardening motif; declarative divine purpose, not merely prediction
22–23	Israel declared the LORD’s “firstborn son”; Pharaoh warned that his firstborn will die	Sonship language central to the Exodus theology; anticipates the tenth plague
24–26	The LORD attacks Moses at the lodging place; Zipporah circumcises their son; threat recedes	The most difficult passage in the chapter; covenant breach in the covenant mediator
27–28	Aaron meets Moses in the wilderness; Moses tells Aaron all that the LORD has spoken and commanded	Divine orchestration of the reunion
29–30	Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel; Aaron speaks, performs the signs	Aaron fulfills his commissioned role as spokesman
31	The people believe; they bow their heads and worship when they hear the LORD has seen their affliction	The chapter closes with faith and worship — the intended response to divine initiative

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	Three Signs: God Answers

Division	Verses	Label
2	10–17	the Credibility Objection Two More Objections: God Answers the Competence and Willingness Objections
3	18–23	Commission Confirmed: Departure, Timing, and the Mission Defined
4	24–26	The Road Attack: The Covenant Demands of the One Who Is Sent
5	27–31	Arrival and Reception: Faith and Worship as the Proper Response

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God qualifies and equips the one He calls, overriding every objection with sovereign provision.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of human inadequacy-protest with this text: the one He sends does not need to be sufficient — He is. But the same God who overrides every objection about competence will not overlook covenant negligence in the one He has called.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Reframe your inadequacy as the precondition for God’s displayed sufficiency, not as a disqualification from service.

Moses’s objections are not uniquely Mosaic — they are the standing protest of every person God has ever called to difficult obedience. The logic of Exodus 4 is this: the point is not that Moses eventually got adequate; the point is that he never needed to be. The commission rests entirely on the LORD’s identity (“I AM WHO I AM”) and the LORD’s power (demonstrated by three signs, not by Moses’s credentials). The reader who sits with a persistent sense of inadequacy before a God-given task needs to examine what they have made the precondition for obedience. God did not wait for Moses to feel ready. He answered the objections and sent him anyway. The correct response to divine calling is not self-assessment but surrender.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Feel the weight of God’s patience with Moses’s repeated evasions — and let it produce gratitude, not presumption.

God's anger burns at Moses's final evasion (v. 14), yet the commission is not withdrawn. Aaron is given, not as a reward for Moses's persistence, but as a merciful provision despite it. The reader ought to feel both the seriousness of Moses's repeated refusal — this is the living God being deflected by a shepherd's self-assessment — and the astonishing patience with which God absorbs the evasion and supplies what is needed. This is not a God who throws up His hands. This is a God whose purposes cannot be undone by human reluctance. That reality should produce not passive presumption on God's patience but active, worshipful trust: He who has called will carry it through.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Identify the specific form of your inadequacy-protest and bring it before God as Moses brought his — honestly, not as a permanent excuse.

Moses's three objections are specific: credibility ("they won't believe me"), competence ("I can't speak"), and will ("send someone else"). Each has a contemporary equivalent: "No one will listen to me," "I'm not gifted for this," and "I'd rather not." The invitation of the text is not to suppress these objections but to bring them to God explicitly — and to hold them open for His answer rather than using them as settled reasons for non-compliance. Concrete step: name the specific objection you are currently using to resist what God has called you to, state it before Him in prayer, and ask for the form of provision He intends to supply — co-laborers, words, courage, or signs.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) Understand that God's hardening of Pharaoh (v. 21) is not fatalistic machinery but sovereign purposefulness — and that it should produce confidence, not anxiety, about resistant people you are called to engage.

The preview of Pharaoh's hardening is given to Moses before he arrives in Egypt — not to discourage him but to frame his expectations. Moses is not going to Egypt to convince Pharaoh through superior rhetoric. He is going as God's agent in a drama whose conclusion is already written. The same is true for every believer sent to speak the gospel into resistant contexts. Human persuasion is real and expected; human persuasion is never the mechanism of change. God's sovereignty over hard hearts — including confirming them in their hardness for His own redemptive purposes — is what frees the messenger from the crushing burden of being responsible for outcomes. Go, speak, and trust the LORD of the hardening.

5. (*Will/Behavior*) Examine your household and your covenant obligations before accepting that your public calling is in order.

The road episode in verses 24–26 is one of the most unsettling passages in the Pentateuch precisely because it is true: the one commissioned to call Israel back to covenant faithfulness had been living in covenant negligence in his own home. God's response was not to reassign the commission — it was to threaten the commissioner's life until the breach was addressed. For those in ministry leadership, gospel-shaped self-examination must move inward before it moves outward: Are the covenant obligations that govern your household — marriage fidelity, the spiritual formation of your children, the integrity of your

private life before God — in order? The God who calls you to speak His word to others has not suspended His claim on your own household. Address the inner before the outer.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 4 establishes a foundational principle about the nature of divine calling: it proceeds from God's sufficiency, not the instrument's. God's responses to Moses's three objections do not argue that Moses is more capable than he thinks — they demonstrate that capability is beside the point. The LORD who made the mouth (v. 11) will govern the mouth. The staff in Moses's hand becomes God's staff (v. 20) — an ordinary shepherd's tool transformed by divine commission into the instrument of national deliverance. This passage also establishes a critical distinction between divine commission and divine permission for covenant negligence: God equips and overrides on the side of the task, but He does not relax His covenant demands on the person He equips. The frightening road episode demonstrates that God's holiness applies with full force to those closest to His redemptive purposes — perhaps especially to them.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 4 is one of the Old Testament's clearest anticipations of the Reformed doctrine of sovereign grace applied to vocation and calling. The commission is entirely top-down: God initiates, God equips, God sends, God anticipates outcomes (hardening of Pharaoh), God defines the audience (Israel as His firstborn son), and God controls the reception (the people believe and worship, v. 31). Moses contributes nothing but objections — and those are overcome. This is the theological logic that Paul draws on in 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 and 2 Corinthians 12:9 — the deliberate use of the inadequate so that no flesh might boast before God. The hardening of Pharaoh in verse 21, read canonically with Romans 9:17–18, grounds the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty over the wills of rulers in the Exodus narrative itself. Furthermore, the covenant-keeping demanded of Moses in verses 24–26 anticipates the Reformed emphasis on the visible covenant community's obligation to covenant signs — leaders above all others bear the weight of covenant consistency, not as a ladder to God's favor but as the non-negotiable integrity of their witness.

Main Takeaway

You do not need to be sufficient for what God is calling you to do — He is sufficient, and that settles the question of your qualification. But the same God who will speak through your inadequate mouth and work through your ordinary hands will not look away from the

covenant negligence in your household or your private life. Answer the call. Keep the covenant. Both belong to the one God who sends.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Moses's objections to ancient biography rather than a contemporary mirror.** The preacher who treats Moses's inadequacy protests as historical curiosities has missed the text's intent entirely. These objections are the universal grammar of human resistance to divine calling. The sermon must move from "Moses said this" to "you have said this — perhaps this week." Without that move, the passage is merely informative, not transformative.
- **Softening God's anger in verse 14 to avoid discomfort.** The text says the LORD's anger "burned against Moses" — this is not mild divine disappointment. A preacher who narrates this as "God was perhaps a little frustrated" has protected the congregation from a truth they need: God takes the deflection of His calling seriously, and the repeated use of inadequacy as an excuse for disobedience is not spiritually neutral. The anger did not undo God's patience or provision — but it was real, and it must be preached as real.
- **Skipping or minimizing the road episode (vv. 24–26) because it is difficult.** This passage is consistently avoided in preaching precisely because it is so strange and so demanding. But it carries one of the chapter's most important claims: covenant consistency is not optional for covenant leaders. Preachers who omit it because it is uncomfortable produce congregants who believe God's call immunizes them from accountability in their private and household lives. The passage must be handled, not skipped.
- **Reading verse 21's hardening of Pharaoh as either fatalistic determinism or merely God's foreknowledge.** The text will not support either extreme. Fatalistic determinism collapses Pharaoh's moral responsibility (the plagues narrative insists on his culpability throughout). Mere foreknowledge evacuates the declarative force of "I will harden" and makes God a spectator of what He in fact governs. The Reformed reading — God's active, judicial confirmation of a direction Pharaoh has already chosen, for God's own redemptive and revelatory purposes — is the most exegetically and canonically coherent position and should be preached without apology, with appropriate acknowledgment of its difficulty.
- **Ending the sermon on the people's belief and worship in verse 31 without grounding it in God's initiative throughout the chapter.** Verse 31 is a genuinely beautiful moment — the people believe, bow, and worship when they hear that the LORD has seen their affliction. But a preacher who ends there without showing that this faith is the fruit of God's sovereign provision (the signs, the commission, the co-laborer, the covenant-keeping demanded of Moses) will inadvertently produce a

moralistic conclusion: “see how they responded in faith — let’s respond like that.” The worship in verse 31 is the intended outcome of divine initiative from verse 1. That is what should be celebrated.

- **Treating the three signs as mere rhetorical tools for persuasion rather than as theological demonstrations of the LORD’s sovereignty.** If the signs are only apologetic props, the sermon will produce a thin application: “God gives us tools to be credible.” If the signs are understood as enacted claims — the serpent-staff reclaiming the symbol of Pharaonic power, the water-becoming-blood previewing divine judgment — the sermon produces what the text intends: awe before a God who governs creation, history, and the symbols of worldly power for the sake of His redemptive purposes.