

Exodus 2:11-25

Introduction

In chapter one of Exodus we saw the slavery and the cruel oppression of the people of Israel in Egypt. But we also saw that God was still present even in the midst of their suffering. The astonishing multiplication and fruitfulness of Israel showed that God was still working out His purposes in Creation and in Covenant.

In the first ten verses of chapter two, we saw that Israel's redemption must be drawing near. We saw God preparing this redemption through the amazing story of the birth and preservation of a baby boy named Moses. We saw that Israel's redemption must be drawing near, even though at the time, the people of Israel were still completely unaware. "Near," in this case, means still eighty years away.

We left off last time when Moses was probably around three years old. Now, this morning, verse eleven begins:

I. Exodus 2:11 — One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brethren and saw their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren.

In Acts chapter seven, Stephen says that Moses was about 40 years old when he went out to visit his people (Acts 7:23). So for the last thirty-five years at least, we know that Moses had been raised as an Egyptian in an Egyptian household. Stephen says: "Pharaoh's daughter adopted [Moses] and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians." (Acts 7:21-22) But apparently, Moses had also been instructed in his true heritage as one of the children of Israel (perhaps through visits with his biological parents?). Twice, Moses emphasizes that he knew what his true roots were. "When [he] had grown up, he went out to *his brethren*... and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, *one of his brethren*." For Moses, His real identity was not the privileged son of an Egyptian princess, but rather a Levite son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the son of an enslaved people.

Now Moses obviously would have known all along about the enslavement of his people, but perhaps he hadn't witnessed it first-hand, or seen for himself how bad it really was. And so on this particular day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to *his brethren* and *saw* their burdens, and he *saw* an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, *one of his brethren*. And having *seen* now with his own eyes, what will Moses *do*? Isn't this the moment we've been set up for with the story of Moses' birth? Isn't it just for this that Moses was born – to rescue and deliver his brethren from their cruel bondage and oppression in Egypt? So having seen now with his own eyes the oppression of his people, what will Moses do?

II. Exodus 2:12 — He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

Finally. Something appears to be happening! The miracle baby has grown up. And he clearly has both the heart and the strength of a true champion and deliverer. He's willing to risk his own life

of privilege and ease for the sake of a single enslaved Israelite that he very likely doesn't even know. It's obvious that Moses was laying everything on the line – completely willing to lose it all. The writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:24–26 — By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

Not only does Moses have the heart of a true deliverer, but he also seems to sense that this will be his divine *calling*. Maybe he's looked at the miracle story of his own birth, and his upbringing in a house of Egyptian royalty, and he's concluded that there must be some reason for this. And that reason must be that he's been strategically placed, and trained, and equipped specifically to bring about the deliverance of his people. Stephen says that "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, *and he was mighty in his words and deeds.*" And then he goes on to say this:

- ✓ Acts 7:23-25 — When [Moses] was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. *He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand.*

So, in every way it appears that Israel's rescue and deliverance is finally coming. The miracle baby has grown up. In all those years, He never forgets who he really is. He has the heart and the strength of a true champion and deliverer. Through his upbringing as the son of an Egyptian princess, He's been uniquely trained and equipped for the job. He understands that this must be the divine calling on his life. And *now* he's taking action!

But wait a minute. Was his action *right*? Some say that it was, and some say that it wasn't. Moses *was* in a position to *defend* his enslaved brother. But to truly defend his brother is obviously going to require nothing short of killing the Egyptian. Nothing less will really do. So was the Hebrew slave in danger of being killed? Would Moses have been wrong to turn away? On the other hand, when the Egyptian suddenly goes missing, who will answer for his disappearance? Moses? Or the slave who was being beaten? Undoubtedly, Moses was very *well-intentioned*, but what was he really hoping to accomplish by killing one Egyptian taskmaster?

As to whether it was morally right or wrong for Moses to kill the Egyptian, the text doesn't really seem to be interested in that question. Stephen, in the New Testament, seems to assume at the very least that what Moses did was not *wrong*. *But still*, there is a rather deafening silence when it comes to God's involvement in this story. As far as we know, Moses has never received any official calling from God, and in all of this story, from verse 11 all the way to verse 22, God Himself is never once mentioned. Now up until this point, we can understand why God hasn't been mentioned. This has helped us to feel the "silence" of God in the midst of Israel's suffering – even as we see at the same time the signs that God is still present and at work "behind the scenes." But here, when the deliverer begins to act, when the champion goes to work, when

supposedly the silence should be ending, the absence of any story of Moses' call, or any mention of God at all feels very, very strange, if not completely wrong. So how will it all turn out?

III. Exodus 2:13–14a — When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?” He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”

Moses goes out to his brothers a second time in as many days. It's clear where his heart is. But this time, instead of seeing a Hebrew brother suffering at the hands of an Egyptian, “*behold!*” two Hebrews were fighting with each other. Of course, this calls for different measures. In this case, if Moses wants to deliver the oppressed, there's no need to strike anyone down. Instead, he simply asks the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?” – to which the man responds: “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”

Clearly, this man is a “bad” man. Not only was he wronging his brother, but now he mocks Moses. “Who died and left you in charge? Do you plan on killing me like you killed the Egyptian?” No matter what we might ever say about how *well-advised* Moses' actions had been on the day before, they were obviously very *well-intentioned*. Moses had acted purely out of compassion and a desire to defend and rescue his brother at the risk of losing everything himself. So there's no excuse in all the world for how this Hebrew responds to Moses – and that's exactly Stephen's point in Acts chapter seven. The sarcastic response of this Hebrew to Moses is just one example of the constant hard-heartedness and unbelief of the entire nation of Israel. Moses certainly did not deserve this response.

And yet, underneath the inexcusable sarcasm, was there still a legitimate point to be made? “*Who made you a prince and a judge over us?*” If this had been a sincere and genuine question, how should Moses answer? He definitely seemed to have all of the right credentials, but where was his calling? Where was his divine appointment? And so now, just as suddenly as things seemed to be going right, everything seems to be going wrong.

IV. Exodus 2:14b–15 — Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and settled [dwelt] in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.

On the day before, Moses had “looked this way and that” and there had been no one there. So it seems likely that the Hebrew slave, in order to save his own life, had told the Egyptian authorities what Moses had done. Or did he just tell the authorities because even though he was glad to have been rescued, he still resented Moses? Whatever the case, we know that all of a sudden, Moses is afraid. As a result of his encounter with these two Hebrews, Moses is given just the head start he needs. When Pharaoh sent to have him killed, Moses had already fled. So even in all the mess, there's still the evidence of God's providence, and of his sovereignty at work. And yet it does still seem to be a mess, doesn't it?

So far, Moses has been the subject of all sorts of verbs. Moses “went out,” Moses “saw,” Moses “saw,” Moses “looked,” Moses “struck,” Moses “hid [the Egyptian],” Moses “went out,” Moses “said.” Certainly, here is someone to rally, and lead, and deliver the people! But then suddenly we find ourselves reading these words: “Moses was afraid... Moses fled... Moses settled *in the land of Midian*.” And it just sounds like a complete train wreck. The miracle baby. The one who never forgot who he really was. The one who had both the heart and the strength of a true champion and deliverer. The one who had been uniquely trained and equipped for the job growing up in a royal Egyptian household. The one who believed that there must be a divine calling on his life. The one who had finally gone out to defend and help his people. And now, this same one is afraid, and flees, and settles in the land of Midian. He’s rejected by his own people, his life is forfeit to the king of Egypt, and now he finds himself an exile in a foreign land. If that’s not a defeat and a failure, then I’m not sure what is.

When Moses arrived in Midian, he sat down by a well...

V. Exodus 2:16–20 — Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come home so soon today?” They said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock.” He said to his daughters, “Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.”

We can very vividly imagine the entire scene. The seven daughters of the priest of Midian have arrived at the well and already begun the process of drawing water and filling the troughs to water their father’s flock. But then the male shepherds arrive, and they refuse to wait their turn. Instead, their plan is to drive off the women and enjoy a small head start with the water the women have already collected. But it just so happens that today, there is a lone Egyptian man who has sat down by this very well. And when the shepherds (*plural*) try to drive off the women, this lone Egyptian man stands up and faces them down.

The text says, “Moses stood up and *saved them*, and watered their flock.” When the daughters come home to their father and he asks them why they’ve returned so early, they say the same thing but use a different word: “An Egyptian *delivered us* out of the hand of the shepherds *and* even drew water for us and watered the flock.” Moses may have fled in fear to a foreign land, but he still continues to display the credentials of a true champion for the oppressed. He has a heart of compassion, and he is strong. He’s not content to sit idly by when there’s something he can do to help. He is a “savior” (cf. 14:13, 30; 15:2) and a “deliverer.” (cf. 3:8; 6:6; 18:10) He appears to be just what Israel needs. So then, what is he doing in Midian!?

VI. Exodus 2:21–22 — And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

One commentator says: “Moses’ naming of his son in line with his sense of alien status is a sad comment on the mission that failed... The Moses who burst with such triumphalism on to the

scene of oppression as would-be deliverer is now a self-exiled resident alien.” (Motyer) What did it mean? What was the point of it all? Eventually, Moses must have felt that there was *some* point because well over forty years later, it was *he* who included this story in what we call today the book of Exodus. So what did it mean? What was the point of it all? I think we can find the answer in Moses’ own conclusion to the story.

VII. Exodus 2:23–25 — During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel moaned because of their slavery and cried out. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

During those many days—*those many days that Moses was out of commission in Midian*—“Israel’s cry for rescue from slavery came up to **God**.” Stuart writes: “The exodus did not come about simply because people were in trouble; it was the result of a prayer of lament for rescue to the **only** one who could actually do something about it.” So far in the first two chapters of Exodus (44 verses), God has been mentioned only briefly in one place (1:20-21). In verse 11 it was Moses who burst onto the scene. But now finally, suddenly, it is **God** who bursts onto the scene. (cf. Stuart) After all of those verbs with Moses as their subject, suddenly we find four verbs in a row that have **God** as their subject. “**God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew.**” “**God heard** their groaning, and **God remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. **God saw** the people of Israel—and **God knew**. In verse 11, it was Moses who “went out to his brethren and **saw** their burdens.” In verse 11, it was Moses who “**saw** an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren.” But now here in verse 25 it is **God** who **sees** – “God **saw** the people of Israel.” (cf. Motyer) Who is it that will save Israel? It is not Moses, but God.

Conclusion

The birth and upbringing of Moses clearly showed that he was being prepared by God for something special. Moses had all the right credentials. Moses was well-intentioned, and definitely had the right heart. Moses was eager, and passionate, and zealous. But for all that, he wasn’t ready yet for the task of leading the people of Israel out of Egypt.

In the next chapter, after forty years spent in the land of Midian, we’ll see a Moses who looks very much the same, and yet also a Moses who has been very much changed. We’ll find a man no longer so confident in himself. In fact, we’ll find a man so *lacking* in *self*-confidence that he’ll repeatedly make excuses as to why he must not be the right man for the job. But it’s also in the next chapter that Moses will receive what he lacked in this one – his divine calling. When he comes to the people again, should anyone say to him, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?” he’ll be able to respond with the words God Himself put in his mouth: “I AM has sent me to you... YAHWEH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” (3:14-15) In Numbers chapter 12, when Moses is being publicly accused by his own brother and sister, a later inspired editor inserts these words:

- ✓ **Numbers 12:3 (NASB)** — (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)

None of us are humble by nature, much less more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. So how and where did God school Moses in this humility? It was in that initial *failure* and his forty year *exile* in the land of Midian (cf. Acts 7:29). One commentator says:

“[Moses’] character... was clearly that of a deliverer. His circumstances, however, offered no support for any calling appropriate to that character. It would surely require an amazing supernatural action of a sovereign God for this washed-up exile to play any role in Israel’s future.” (Stuart)

“In the work of God mere human effort, however well-intentioned, committed or influential, results in failure.” (Motyer) And so in the midst of whatever God-given “credentials” we may have (or not have), we must constantly be brought to the end of ourselves in order that we might be useful tools in God’s hands. It’s when we feel the most helpless, it’s when we’re the most acutely aware of our own failings, that we can be used the most mightily and powerfully by God. Even the “great” Apostle Paul gives this testimony:

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 — But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Moses of Exodus chapter two could not have handled the constant grumbling, and complaining, and rejection that will eventually be his. But the Moses of chapter three and onward is one who’s learned that it’s not about him, but about the God whose power is made perfect in his weakness. He is not the Savior. God is.

And so we also learn that *we* must *never* look to *any* man – unless that man be Jesus Christ. This is especially important in this day of Christian “pop culture” – of superstar pastors, or rock star bands, of famous bloggers and authors, or even just the no-name pastor at a small local church. The value of all these people, and of each one of us, will ultimately be measured by the extent to which this was the motto of their life and ministry: “He must increase, but I [and all those who benefit from my ministry] must decrease.” (John 3:30) Yes, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, but all of these witnesses (including Moses) are simply witnesses to Jesus – our *one* great hope, and our *only* Savior.