

Exodus 2:11-25

"God remembers his people"

sermon by Nate Egger
October 11, 2015

Moses Flees to Midian

¹¹ One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. ¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³ 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?" ¹⁴ He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known." ¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.

¹⁶ Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. ¹⁷ The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. ¹⁸ When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come home so soon today?" ¹⁹ They said, "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock." ²⁰ He said to his daughters, "Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." ²¹ And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. ²² She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."

God Hears Israel's Groaning

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

- Exodus 2:11-25

Our passage today comes from the second half of the second chapter of Exodus, the second book of the bible. Exodus is all about God as the hero of his people. This is the theme seen throughout scripture, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Exodus. When the nation of Israel got into trouble and doubted God, he took them back to the events of Exodus over and over again to remind them of his provision and his awesome power. Psalms 78, 80, 81, 105, 106, 114, 135 and 136, for example, all remind us of God's central role in the salvation of Israel. But to really understand the significance of what God is doing in Exodus we need to first take a brief trip back into Genesis and see a few of the promises he made as he formed them as a nation.

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."... 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them....So shall your offspring be."... 7 And he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

- Genesis 15:1,5,7

The formation of Israel began with Abraham. God called him from the city of Ur, in the land of the Chaldeans, and promised him three things. First, Abraham and his family would get God himself. They would enjoy a unique relationship with God, he would be their shield and their very great reward. He also promised Abraham countless offspring and a specific area of land in Canaan in which they could put down roots and establish themselves as a nation. This promise was reiterated to Abraham's son Isaac and again to his son Jacob who was re-named Israel by the Lord. Israel had 12 sons, and their descendants became the 12 tribes of Israel.

You'll recall at the end of Genesis Israel and his sons and their families had moved to Egypt to avoid starvation and settled in the land of Goshen. And we discovered in the first chapter of Exodus that God fulfilled his promise for multiplication. So much so that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, grew afraid of them and tried everything he could think of to stop that growth. But it was to no avail. The Lord's purpose prevailed. We know that God's hand was in all of this, preservation and persecution, because hundreds of years before any of it happened God told Abraham that it was coming.

13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

- Genesis 15:13-14,16

Sometimes I just read past passages like this. No big deal. God makes another prophecy. But please let us not make that mistake today. Let us not miss the incredible nature of what God is doing here. Hundreds of years before Jacob became Israel and had 12 sons God already knew they were headed to Egypt. He already knew that they would grow rapidly in number and be subjected to slavery. And he already knew how and when he was going to rescue them. God is the hero of Israel's history, not the patriarchs, because God is in control of it all.

Now in Exodus 2 we are seeing God begin to unfold his rescue plan. He is raising up a leader for Israel who will stand up to Pharaoh and deliver the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt so that he could return them to the Promised Land in Canaan. That leader's name is Moses. Last week we read of Moses' birth and the miraculous turn of God's hand that allowed him not only to escape death but to be adopted into the household of Pharaoh man who was trying to kill him (and every other male baby in

Israel). Pause and consider the humor in that for a moment. God has the very man who was bent on destroying Israel through slavery and the murder of newborn males now feeding, educating, and otherwise providing for every need of Moses the Hebrew who would one day lead Israel out of Egypt forever. Again, God is in control. He is the hero. This week we see the hand of providence yet again ordering the events of Moses' life as God prepares him to lead Israel.

¹¹ One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. ¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³ 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?" ¹⁴ He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known." ¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.

- Exodus 2:11-15

Last week's passage left us with Moses in the house of Pharaoh being raised with all the advantages of royalty in Egypt. Our passage today skips a quickly ahead to when Moses was 40 years old¹. Here he is in the perfect position to work influence on behalf of God's people, right? Perhaps he could have asked Pharaoh to enact just laws or arranged the slow and steady secret flight of the Israelites from Egypt or maybe he was in line to rule himself one day and could have done away with slavery all together. As Stephen tells us later in Acts 7:25, Moses himself thought he was the perfect man to save Israel. He "supposed that [in killing the Egyptian] his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand." Not only did they not want Moses as a leader but they apparently they told the Egyptians about the killing and Moses was forced to flee for his life. In the matter of just a couple of days God took a likely hero and made him a very unlikely one for God's people.

What is God doing here? Has he lost control. Things were perfect. He had Moses all teed up to lead and then everything got screwed up. Certainly all is lost now. There's no way another Hebrew will ascend to Egyptian royalty. But then again. Maybe God is still in control. Maybe this is another example of the kind of upside down values that God's kingdom is built on. Maybe God wants to strip away Moses' pedigree so that Moses doesn't get the credit for leading Israel. Maybe he wants to take away Moses' power in order that everyone would know who the true hero is. Paul spells out God's otherworldly philosophy for the Corinthians like this:

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in

¹ Acts 7:23

the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

- 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Moses had been adopted into the noble line of one of the most, if not the most powerful nations in the world at that time. He had had the best education the world could offer. He had power and wealth. Think of all the good things he could have done with that. We know his heart was in the right place for, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” But despite Moses’ good intentions and all the good he could have done with that pedigree it was all taken away. He fled for his life after his killing of the Egyptian was discovered and was reduced to a nomadic shepherd in the desert to the west of Egypt (on the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula), rejected by the very people he came to save. All that power and influence was taken away so that when we look back at the story of Exodus we would see that God is the hero and not Moses.

¹⁶ Now the priest² of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. ¹⁷ The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. ¹⁸ When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come home so soon today?” ¹⁹ They said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock.” ²⁰ He said to his daughters, “Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.” ²¹ And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. ²² She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

- Exodus 2:16-22

Moses’ story continues. He runs into the Midianites who were a polytheistic and nomadic people that roamed about in the desert in the north of the Sinai Peninsula. Once again we find Moses defending the weak and oppressed. The results are a little more comforting this time, though, as he gets a job, a place to stay, and even a wife and son. He Moses’ father-in-law, Reuel (later known as Jethro) was a priest likely of one or more of the many gods the Midianites worshipped. Just as a reminder of the powerful message that the Exodus sent to the surrounding nations, we see Jethro in Exodus 18:11 acknowledging that the “Lord is greater than all gods.”

In the naming of Moses’ son Gershom, which sounds like the Hebrew word for “sojourner”, we get a reminder that Egypt was never his home. Stephen reminds us in Acts that Moses settled in Midian also “as a foreigner”. That he (and the rest of Israel) were residents of another kingdom. At first glance we might be tempted to think that this

² The Midianites worshipped many gods. It wasn’t until Reuel (aka Jethro) witnessed the Exodus that he recognized the supremacy of God. See Exodus 18:10-11.

other kingdom was a geographic one, defined by the borders of the yet to be claimed Promise Land. But the writer of Hebrews, picking up on this sojourner theme, reminds us that all the heroes of were not looking for a physical, geographic, or earthly kingdom but a heavenly one.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

- Hebrews 11:13-16

Moses stays in Midian for forty more years, while the slavery and oppression of God's people continued. Meanwhile the Pharaoh who sought Moses' life dies and is replaced.

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

- Exodus 2:23-25

Finally we get a glimpse of the hero of the story, God, who is faithfully and patiently biding his time. But why the delay? Why 400 years of oppression vs. 40 or even just 4? Was it that God simply hadn't heard the Israelites crying out before? That doesn't seem likely. He's got pretty good ears. He's also been orchestrating events already to bring about the redemption of Israel. So why would God delay for hundreds of years to bring his people out of Egypt? The simple answer is I don't know, at least not specific to this situation. Sometimes God's patience allows more folks to know him (2 Peter 3:9) or to refine the character of those who already do (Romans 5:3-5). Sometimes it allows individuals and nations to pile on their guilt so that their condemnation will be all the more clear (Genesis 15:13-16). Other times God is simply waiting for us to cry out and acknowledge our need for him rather than asking to further our own ends or not asking at all (James 4:2-3).

When we do run up against the inscrutable will of God, crying out with the Israelites "How long oh Lord" we are left to simply rest on the promises we do know, such as the one from Romans 8:28 God works out everything for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose. When, how, where, who...? That's all up to him. For now we see in part. We see the details or threads. One day we will see fully. We will get to take that cosmic step back and see the beautiful tapestry of redemptive history that God has been weaving this whole time.

Our passage today ends with a hopeful look forward, “God heard their groaning” and “God saw the people of Israel--and God knew”. The end of Israel’s time in Egypt is nearing. With Moses brought low, the scene is set. God is coming to save his people.

In Exodus God uses Moses to save his people. But Moses was a human and could not restore them to perfect relationship with God. Eventually, God needed to come down himself. So more than a thousand years after our story today, another child was born. Like Moses he narrowly escaped the prescribed massacre of king and grew into man who brought a new covenant to God’s people. But unlike Moses, Jesus was God and never faltered in his pursuit of the reward. He lived a sinless life but was crucified on our behalf; his death paying the price for our sins. And unlike Moses he rose again from the dead, offering us a life of hope, satisfaction, purpose, and freedom in him forever.

God is the hero of this story. But is he the hero of your story and my story? That is the question Scripture forces us to ask ourselves. Do we find our security and hope in him? Are we making decisions based on how they effect our ability to participate in his kingdom, bearing his image and multiplying his rule in the hearts of those around us, OR are we building our lives primarily around something else or someone else? What is your first thought when making a decision about where to live or work or go to school? Whether to go on vacation or not? When to retire, if at all? Is your first thought about how comfortable or fun it will be for you or your family? Or how much will I get paid? Is it, “I wonder what my parents or spouse will think?”

I pray that you would accept Scripture’s invitation to throw off every weight, whether innocent seeming distractions or outright sin, which so closely to us in this life and “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2). Throwing off the distractions is not easy. Sometimes it looks like we’re giving up everything. That was certainly the case with Moses. But it is more than worth it.

We get beauty for ashes and joy in exchange for mourning. All the stuff that we once clung to so tightly is seen as rubbish next to the all-surpassing wonder of being restored to our Creator and King—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the great reward of life, and when we see him as such, those things that looked like yokes, burdens, and sacrifices from outside his kingdom are transformed into opportunities for experiencing more of God’s presence in our lives. When we choose to seize those opportunities, even the most mundane details of our lives will begin to bear witness to the worthiness of our King whose “loving kindness is better than life.”