

Followers of the Way

Moses: God's outsider

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Exodus 2:11-25

Have you ever felt like you do not fit in? That you are on the outside looking in? That God has a call on your life that has not been fulfilled? That you have missed what you were made for, and in some way, you are a failure? That you need to go into a kind of exile? If so, spare a thought for Moses.

He was the perennial outsider: a believer in the God of Abraham, living among pagans; from a race of slaves, yet positioned beside royalty; an intended victim of genocide, who rubbed shoulders with the very people who tried to murder him; an educated man among the untutored and illiterate; a prince among nomads; a shepherd at the court of kings; a stranger within his own family; a foreigner to his own countrymen. Quite probably, he was more fluent in Egyptian than he was in Hebrew (Exodus uses several words of Egyptian origin, one of the things that points to its being written by Moses). Maybe he spoke Hebrew with a funny accent. He was neither fish nor fowl – not entirely Egyptian in his attitudes and beliefs, yet not completely Hebrew in his experiences. You can hear the agonised pull of a yearning for identity and belonging in how the words “his own people” are repeated twice in a single sentence (Exodus 2:11).

Moses was a foundling – drawn out from the Nile, where his mother (acting under appalling duress) had set him adrift – an infant whose origins the Egyptians thought so obscure, they named him just Moses, meaning born. Normally, you would be born of someone (Rameses was born of Ra, Thutmose was born of Tut, and so on). But in their eyes, Moses was the boy with no past, who came from nothing. And if you do not know where you come from, that is a hard start in life. What a burden, too, to be of uncertain parentage among the royalty and proud aristocrats of the Egyptian court. More than most, Moses must have had trouble coming to terms with who he was, and what he ought to be.

That is not to say he was totally without anchor points or guidance. God wonderfully arranged things so Pharaoh's daughter asked Moses' mother to nurse him (Exodus 1:7-10). So, she was able to teach him about the one true God, and give him enough of a grounding in the faith of his forefathers to sustain him throughout his years at the heart of the pagan, polytheistic Egyptian state. What a woman she must have been!

Moses' story should really encourage us. His later roles – as leader, deliverer, prophet, judge, lawgiver, and “friend” (Exodus 33:11) of God – did not come early or easy: a reminder that, before God asks us to do something, He will equip and train us, and this

process is likely to take time. Moses had forty years in Egypt before he fled to Midian, and another forty years before God spoke to him in the burning bush and called him to return to deliver Israel from bondage (Exodus 3 and 4, Acts 7:30). Yes, Moses was an exceptional man called for an exceptional task, but the same basic principle applies to us all. Our time of waiting may well be painful, as ground is prepared, and we are brought to the right place physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. We must learn to accept we cannot achieve anything truly lasting or worthwhile on our own, only through the power of God working in us. At first, Moses did as we all tend to do, moving in his own strength and thinking he knew best. And so, he took the law into his own hands: “He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Glancing this way and that and seeing no-one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” (Exodus 2:11-12).

Fired by hatred of injustice, conscious of having a position of privilege and responsibility, wanting to do something – anything – to right a dreadful wrong. (Oh, that we might have the heart of compassion of Moses, to go out and see our poor people at their hard labour, oppressed and in bondage, and want to bring them freedom in Christ!) But, at this time in his life, Moses thought the ends justified the means. It never works, and only ever leads to more pain and suffering. The result on this occasion was precisely what we have seen all too often through the ages when godly insight and perspective take a back seat, and morality is cast to the wind. Moses became a murderer.

Such drastic action did not endear him to the people he was trying to help, since the soil was not yet ready for planting: “Moses thought that his own people would realise that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.” (Acts 7:25). If this hints that Moses had some idea God wanted to use him to deliver Israel, we have to say his outlook at this point was sorely limited. Perhaps being raised as a prince of Egypt had made him proud, reliant on his own abilities, conscious of being “no ordinary child” (Acts 7:20 and Hebrews 11:23) and “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). He might well have held high office in the Egyptian state – Jewish historian Josephus says the future prophet led an Egyptian army in the south. God would use all Moses’ skills and experiences in due course, but they were not of themselves what He was looking for. He is interested first and foremost in the condition of our hearts, not the accomplishments we set such store by, or the labels we attach to ourselves.

At this stage, the future prophet appears to have been unaware of God’s methods, and of His timing, and to have had only the faintest grasp of any coherent plan of action. He responded in the heat of the moment without divine authority, and as a result neither his words nor his actions carried weight with men: “The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, ‘Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?’ The man said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’” (Exodus 2:13-14). The irony, of course, is that in the fullness of time, the LORD would raise Moses up as both ruler and judge over all Israel.

It is often said that, before God can use us, he must break our hearts. Moses' heart was broken on seeing the oppression and agony of his people. It was broken again as his first attempts to help them ended in failure, and broken countless times more over the years of desert wandering as he saw their seemingly endless self-pity, backsliding, ingratitude, and sinfulness, as he became the butt of their continual murmurings of discontent and the rebelliousness even of his own brother and sister. There is no doubt that Moses suffered grievously, but it was not without purpose. Someone with a broken heart seldom has room for pride. God took a man of uncommon ability, marked from birth by signs of special favour, who heard the call of destiny and spoke to God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exodus 33:11), and made him "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3). Only in that frame of mind was he a suitable instrument for his Creator to use.

What a world of pain is in even that small part of Moses' life we heard about today. In fear of his life, "he fled from Pharaoh" (Exodus 2:15). All he knew was lost to him in an instant – friends, family, wealth, status, and even more important, the wreck of all his hopes, what must have seemed the end of any chance that God could use him to free Israel. His life of bright promise was brought down into the dust, and he was left utterly alone in a strange land. Imagine what the next forty years were like for Moses, when he lived as a shepherd in Midian. He would have known "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out" (Exodus 2:23), and no doubt he groaned and cried out with them. If he had any answer from God, the Bible does not mention it. Quite probably, there was silence. We cannot know what depths of despair Moses might have plumbed, what regrets and missed opportunities may have played upon his mind, what anguished thoughts have lain heavy on his heart. A tiny glimpse of the burden he bore appears from the name he gave his firstborn son by Zipporah – Gershom (Exodus 2:22), meaning, *an alien there*. It suggests that, though Moses had a wife and baby boy, in these early years in Midian, at least, he never felt truly at home. Yet he did not allow these things to embitter, distract or cripple him. Instead, he pursued knowledge of, relationship with and obedience to God. As a result, the power of the Almighty was released in him to transform, overcome, and transcend what might otherwise have been grave handicaps.

An acorn has within it all the potential of the oak it will grow to be. In fact, it has within it the potential to become an entire forest. Often, we are not aware of the potential God has set within us, and we lack the perspective to see our God-ordained future in the contours of our past life. For the Egyptians, Midian was a wild and uncivilised place, a wilderness. But in the economy of God and in the context of His purposes for Moses, Midian was something else entirely. It means, *to judge* or *to govern*, and it was here that Moses would learn to judge and to govern – a process that starts with self-government, moves on to government within the family, and progresses to government beyond the personal and domestic spheres. And here is something we need to take to heart: God may intend us for great things, but He will not move us on faster than we are ready to go. Moses was destined by God to be leader, judge, and lawgiver of Israel, but he could not fulfil those roles properly before he learnt to govern himself. In killing the Egyptian, Moses acted

rashly, in anger and with pride. His years in Midian taught him humility, patience, and self-government. It taught him how to shepherd sheep, and therefore how to shepherd Israel. It taught him how to be a husband, as God is husband to His people. And it taught him how to be father, as the LORD is Father to all who belong to Him. Midian was where God moulded Moses' character for the task ahead.

All this potential was there from the start, and a single sentence sums it up: "Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered the flock." (Exodus 2:17). It could almost stand as the manifesto for what he was to do forty years later – stirred to action by encountering God in the burning bush, he came to the rescue of Israel, and cared for that flock until his death. As he fled for Midian, Moses thought his chance to be used by God was over. He did not realise this was simply the start of a new chapter.

The wilderness is a place where God tests and challenges, and Satan attacks and tempts. Immediately he arrived in Midian, Moses faced temptations:

The temptation of inaction: When shepherds drove the daughters of Jethro, priest of Midian, away from the well (Exodus 2:16-17), Moses could have done nothing. Taking things into his own hands got him into hot water in Egypt, after all, and it would have been easy not to have interfered. Instead, he "got up." *Action trumped inaction.*

The temptation of cowardice: outnumbered by the shepherds, it took courage for Moses to "[come] to the rescue" (Exodus 2:17) of Jethro's daughters. *Courage overcame fear.*

The temptation to rest on his laurels: Moses was not satisfied with making sure Jethro's daughters had access to the well. He "watered their flock" (Exodus 2:17) – a tiring, time-consuming task, hardly befitting a prince of Egypt. *Concern for the needs of others has no room for complacency.*

The temptation of being self-seeking: Moses sought no reward or recompense for what he had done. Instead, it fell to Jethro to ask his daughters, "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat." (Exodus 2:20). *Godly motivation has no room for selfishness.*

Moses met his temptations head on, and defeated them. So must we. Even if we are in the wilderness, we should still ask ourselves: are we sitting on our hands when God is calling us to do something? Are we being cowardly, by failing to speak or act as God wants? Are we resting on our laurels, instead of striking out in new directions? Are we seeking personal advantage, rather than serving simply for the sake of doing good and obeying God?

Moses was eighty years in the making before he was ready to be summoned to his life's work. That is a real challenge for us: we sometimes act like we expect a word from the LORD every other day, but Moses waited over forty years for what has been prophesied over him to be fulfilled. Abraham, too, waited decades for what was foretold to come to pass. As the old hymn has it, Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus,

but to trust and obey. If we are in the wilderness because that is where God wants us to be, then we need to hand the reins over to Him, so He can work out His good purposes in this phase of our lives. And we need to accept this may be a long process.

Conceivably, though, we may be in the wilderness of our own choosing – though Moses doubtless “went to live in Midian” (Exodus 2:15) since it was a place beyond Egyptian control, yet he still made a choice about where to go. If we have chosen the wilderness we are in just now, we might need to ask God if this is where He still really wants us to be. A wilderness might not be pleasant, but our tendency to inertia means even a wilderness is somewhere we might get stuck after a while, and God may need to shake us up to cause us to move us on.

Discouragement is always a danger in the wilderness. But we can be sure our “cry for help” (Exodus 2:23) goes up to God just as that of the enslaved Israelites did, that God hears our groaning (Exodus 2:24), and that He “[looks] on [us] and [is] concerned about [us].” (Exodus 2:25). The wilderness is where God realigns us, so that we come into step with His plans and purposes, instead of trying to do things our own way. It is a place of challenge, adversity, and threat, where only total dependence on God will see us through. And precisely because of that, it is the place where we can move to a new and deeper level of relationship with Him, from which power will flow into our lives and beyond. This is why great moves of God so often come out of the wilderness – as with John the Baptist and Jesus Himself. Do not let the wilderness wear you down. Use it instead to allow God to equip and empower you for the next stage of what He has in store.

God did amazing work *through* Moses, but He did amazing work *in* him, as well. He delights to bring redemption, reconciliation, and realignment. He worked progressively to heal the wounds of Moses’ past and bring him into the future He planned for him:

Family estrangement was dealt with when he was **reunited with the brother** he had been separated from: “[Aaron] is already on his way to meet you and his heart will be glad when he sees you.” (Exodus 4:14).

All confusion of identity was resolved: Moses’ second son “was named Eliezer, for he said, ‘My father’s God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.’” (Exodus 18:4). He discovered that His identity as a child of the living God was all the identity he needed.

The exiled fugitive was given a new and better homeland: “And I have promised to bring you up ... into ... a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:17).

The wilderness is where, by the grace of God, bad experiences can be turned to good account and our potential reclaimed.

Moses was God’s outsider, and we are his outsiders, too. The wilderness is not where He intends His children to languish forever, but it is sometimes a necessary waystation on the road to a greater and more glorious future. Being in the world, but not of it, we all

spend time in the wilderness. Let us use it to meet our temptations, realign ourselves with God, and let Him draw us into our destiny. And who knows, to stand one day before Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go!" (Exodus 5:1).