

Exodus 2:11-25 (1984 NIV)

God's Hand in Human Prominence, Obscurity & Desperation

Exodus 2

11 One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people.

12 Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

13 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?"

14 The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."

15 When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.

16 Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock.

17 Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.

18 When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, "Why have you returned so early today?"

19 They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock."

20 "And where is he?" Reuel asked his daughters. "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat."

21 Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage.

22 Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land."

23 During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

24 God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

25 So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

Introduction

I once worked briefly with the late Rev Henry Khoo, former Prison Chaplain of Singapore, when I joined his prison outreach ministry many years ago. It was then that I heard from him of a man named Chuck Colson.

The life of the late Chuck Colson was a testament to the transformational power of Jesus Christ. As special counsel to President Richard Nixon, he was deeply embroiled in the Watergate scandal.

While Colson was awaiting arrest and prosecution for his Watergate involvement, Tom Phillips, then president of Raytheon (a major U.S. defence contractor and industrial corporation) invited Colson to his home and witnessed to him about Jesus Christ.

"I left his house that night shaken by the words he had read from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* about pride," Colson said. "It felt as if Lewis were writing about me ... I had an overwhelming sense that I was unclean."

After Colson left Phillips, he got into his car, but couldn't drive away. The conviction of the Holy Spirit came upon him and he began to weep, "I couldn't (drive). I was crying too hard—and I was not one to ever cry."

"I spent an hour calling out to God. I did not even know the right words. I simply knew that I wanted Him. And I knew for certain that the God who created the universe heard my cry."

At that pivotal moment, Colson was born again. He testified, "From the next morning onward, I have never looked back. I can honestly say that the worst day of the last 35 years has been better than the best days of the 41 years that preceded it. That's a pretty bold statement, given my time in prison, three major surgeries, and two kids with cancer at the same time, but it is absolutely true."

The former counsellor to the most powerful man in the US began to serve the King above every earthly king. From that day forward, he knew he belonged to Christ and he was "on earth to advance His Kingdom."

On 21 June 1974, Colson was convicted and sentenced to seven months in a federal prison in Alabama. While in prison, Colson witnessed what he perceived as injustices done to prisoners and significant failings in the rehabilitation process. After his release, he felt called by God to establish Prison Fellowship (PF) in 1976, which today is the largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families in the US. These had become his "own people" during his time in prison.

At PF, Colson led efforts to improve prisoner rehabilitation, reform the prison system, and establish Christian outreach and discipleship programmes for prisoners.

In 1977, a warden challenged his discipleship programme for prisoners conducted outside the prison. He refused to allow more prisoners to participate, saying: "If your programme is so good, why don't you bring it inside the prison?"

Just as God used Pharaoh's hardened heart to advance His work, the same proved true with Colson's ministry. A total of 93 inmates attended PF's first in-prison seminar, which paved the way for hundreds of thousands of prisoners across the country to receive biblically-based teaching through in-prison seminars and Bible studies. Later, PF's influence began to spread internationally, and today, they have programmes active in 100 countries, including Singapore.

On 18 April 2012, Colson went home to be with his God without recovering from a stroke that had hit him earlier.

(<http://blog.godreports.com/2012/04/leading-evangelical-voice-chuck-colson-passes-to-his-reward/>)

In his times of prominence, obscurity and desperation, we see how God's hand was with Chuck Colson, resulting in him serving God and His world in a way that Chuck could never dream of accomplishing in his own strength.

We see this to be also true in the life of Moses as we look at the second half of Ex 2 today. We see how he was dramatically dislodged from a position of prominence down to a place of obscurity, and out of that seemingly desperate state, God was preparing and shaping him for greater things.

It will help us to keep in mind that Exodus is not mainly about Moses; not mainly about Israel. It is mainly about the God of Moses and Israel. And actually, that is precisely the lesson Moses himself had to learn. Moses had to learn, as we also have to learn, that life is not mainly about oneself; it is mainly about God.

Remember, Moses has been spared in the massacre of the Hebrew boys. His family had made a basket ("ark"), placed him in the reeds at the side of the river Nile where he was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter. She eventually adopted him and gave him the name Moses.

We join the story in Ex 2:11 and really we are leaping forward forty years—Moses was now a grown man. We know very little of Moses' life in the years between his infancy and his maturity as he reappears here in verse 11.

Stephen in Acts 7:22 said this of Moses: "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was mighty in his words and deeds." He was sent off to university in the court of the pharaohs to learn to become a good Egyptian prince. It was the very best that education could provide in those days. It was designed to prepare Moses for leadership in Egypt as a member of the ruling dynasty.

In verses 11-15 we observe how Moses attempted to do God's will to deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian oppression. We also see here God's hand in teaching Moses while he was in his prominence as an Egyptian prince.

I. The Temptation of Prominence (vv. 11-15)

Exodus 2:11 tells us that Moses “went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor.” We are not sure at this point if he had already consciously identified with the people of Israel as his countrymen. The fact that he went to observe their hard labor suggests that he had a strong degree of compassion for them.

Ex 2:15 tells us that Moses fled from Pharaoh when the latter was seeking to kill him for killing an Egyptian. This seems to suggest that Pharaoh had been suspicious of Moses’ loyalty, and the killing of the Egyptian only confirmed where Moses’ true sympathy would be.

Though the text is not clear, most commentators are of the view that Moses was at least somewhat aware of his true pedigree at this time. Heb 11:24-25 tells us that “by faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”

God had His agenda behind Moses’ training and preparation in Egypt. How could he be anything other than a royal prince in the Egyptian courts girded with all the trappings of power, and immersed in Egyptian paganism and intellectualism. Yet verse 11 tells us that God brought Moses to a crisis point. God worked to bring Moses to a point where he had to choose between his early Egyptian upbringing and his original Hebrew heritage. Twice in verse 11 the Hebrew slaves are called “his own people” or literally, “his brothers”. He had to choose between standing with them and all that was offered to him in the court of Pharaoh.

God brought Moses to a crisis point; a turning point; a moment of decision. Verses 11b-12: “... He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

His actions certainly betrayed a guilty conscience. Moses clearly reacted when he saw a Hebrew slave mistreated and in uncontrolled rage killed the Egyptian. As the adopted grandson of Pharaoh he could have simply exerted moral authority and stop the Egyptian slave driver. There’s no need to kill. But no, he used brute force in blind rage.

He acted impulsively and fell to the temptation of doing his way, NOT God’s way. As a result no one followed him. In fact, the Hebrew slaves rejected his leadership. They questioned him in v. 14, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?”

Acting impulsively without self control, even when it is based on a right intention, is almost always wrong. Think of:

- An evangelist who preaches the Gospel passionately as the way of truth and salvation, but at the same time, condemns and belittles other faiths and their followers.
- A church leader who loves the church, and so he rallies his own supporters in order to pressure the other leaders to do what he thinks is best for the church.
- A father who wants to help his son succeed in life, but pushes him so hard that the child ends up in depression.
- An athlete who has trained very hard for a gold medal, and decides to take some performance-enhancing substance on race day.
- A Christian businessman who wants to clinch a lucrative deal for his company, and so joins his big-time client in a wild party and compromises all his Christian values.
- An activist who believes that the freedom to speak must be respected, but goes on a campaign to slander others using the social media.

Moses had one of the finest CVs possible. He was raised by the royal family of Egypt. He was schooled at the finest educational institutions of the greatest empire of his day.

But the notable pastor-teacher Chuck Swindoll has rendered a word of caution in his study guide, *Moses: God's Man for a Crisis* (Word, 1985): "But simply because he (Moses) had been raised ... to national leadership did not mean he was ready to take the reigns of spiritual leadership. No one can adequately lead God's people until he has become a consistent follower of God."

Spiritual leadership is not something we grasp or claim or assume. It can only be bestowed by God and must be recognized by others. The fact that you are a great leader in the world does not necessarily qualify you as a godly leader.

Moses' intention was right when he went out to help his suffering Hebrew people. He had given up position, pleasure, and prosperity to take his stand with God's people. But he went about his mission in the wrong way, resulting in a 40-year detour. From a prince in the palace of Egypt, Moses became a shepherd in the barren wilderness of Midian. From being in the limelight of Pharaoh's government, Moses went into isolation and obscurity. From being a "somebody," he became a "nobody."

Someone once said, "For every one hundred people who can handle adversity there is only one who can handle prosperity." Success or prominence somehow changes people. In fact, such success or prominence even destroys some of them. There are some benefits that come with being successful or prominent:

- Position
- Power
- Privileges

And along with these benefits come some pitfalls.

1. Misuse: Some people are nice until they get certain degree of authority or power. All of a sudden they start mistreating others and making unrealistic demands on people.

2. Abuse: You can be a driver or a motivator. Drivers have no appreciation for the people they oversee, while motivators are constantly finding ways to empower the people around them. Drivers hold people down and exploit them to serve their own needs. Motivators lift people up and equip them to serve Jesus and change the world. In other words, God-given power is for a person to serve God and others, not himself.

3. Profiteering: When you are prominently up there, you will enjoy many privileges to receive. If you are not careful, you can fall into the temptation of intentionally using your prominence to profit from your privileges. Now, that doesn't mean you can't be appreciated generously by people of goodwill. It simply means that you have to check the motives of your heart when you so receive.

Personally, I am reminded that a spiritual leader needs be prayerful of himself as he can fall into this temptation of prominence intentionally or unintentionally.

Also, the Body of Christ needs to be watchful of their spiritual leaders, not by way of policing over them but praying over them as they too can fall into this temptation of prominence intentionally or unintentionally.

As I look at you from where I am, perhaps I am talking to some who are already successful and prominent in some ways, or may be so sometime later.

If you consider yourself in that category, remember the temptation of prominence as in Moses' experience.

God's hand in Moses' prominence is seen in Him teaching Moses this lesson: In our prominence (even spiritual prominence), we can fall to the temptation of achieving noble ends (even spiritual ends) using man's way and not God's way.

How then do we overcome the temptation of achieving noble ends using man's way; of doing things man's way and not God's way?

We will answer that as we now move on to see God's hand at work in Moses' obscurity as he fled into the wilderness.

II. The Test of Obscurity (vv. 16-22)

Moses fled to the land of Midian. Notice the great contrast—from having every convenience and luxury in Pharaoh’s palace, with servants waiting on his every desire, Moses was now on his own out in the wilderness. From being surrounded by all of the important, educated, influential people in Egypt, now his only company was a nomadic shepherd family. After earning his Ph.D. in Egypt’s most prestigious university, now his job was to watch over a flock of sheep that didn’t even belong to him. After he had helped defend the seven daughters of Reuel (also known as Jethro in Ex 3:1) against some aggressors, he settled down to live among them for 40 long years.

However, Moses’ forty years in the wilderness was better schooling than his education in all the learning of the Egyptians. He had a lot of time alone to spend with God. God used those years to develop a servant’s heart in Moses. It prepared him for the next forty years to come in which he would lead God’s people in the same desert.

We learn one significant change that took place in Moses’ character development while he was living in obscurity—i.e. the development of a servant attitude in him.

When some shepherds tried to bully and harass the seven daughters of Reuel at the well, Moses “got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock” (Ex 2:16-17). Again we see Moses defending the weak and helpless. But this time with a difference—he did not kill.

Also, instead of being served as he had been used to in Egypt, Moses took the first steps to serve others—some women who were tending sheep.

We see him accepting the invitation of Reuel (Jethro) the Midianite priest to become a member of his extended household. He also accepted responsibility for shepherding sheep (Ex 2:18-21; 3:1). He then settled down and married Zipporah, one of Reuel’s daughters and had two sons with her—Gershom and Eliezer (Ex 2:22; 18:3-4). We now see in Moses a servant attitude as he lived humbly in his obscurity. He spent the next 40 years raising a family and pasturing a flock of sheep in the desert.

You see these sequences of forty in Moses’ life—forty years in Egypt, forty years in the desert of Midian, and then forty years later with Israel after leaving Egypt, leading them through the wilderness.

The late pastor-teacher Jim Boice once said (<https://www.prpbooks.com/blog/2020/05/the-character-of-moses-an-excerpt-taken-from-the-life-of-moses-by-james-montgomery-boice>): “Moses was forty years in Egypt learning something, and forty years in the desert learning to be nothing, and forty years in the wilderness with the Hebrew people proving God to be everything.”

God wanted Moses to first spend time with Him in desert obscurity before He sent Moses on his mission back to Egypt in public spotlight again. Time spent

in intimacy with God even in a low-profile posture is never wasted or unproductive time, or missed opportunities for the limelight because it allows God to speak and shape us for His greater works in His time.

In teaching Moses while he was in obscurity, God is also teaching us lessons about:

- Our smallness and His bigness
- Our weakness and His strength
- Our sin and His grace
- Our bankruptcy and His riches

And so we do not lean and rest on ourselves, but we always lean and rest on the Lord.

Moses took at least 120 years to learn that—40 years in Egyptian prominence, 40 years in Midianite obscurity, and 40 years in the wilderness with the Hebrew people. We probably don't live that long to learn these lessons first-hand, and so let's not reinvent the wheel and be intentionally teachable to the Lord's lessons for Moses.

In helping Moses develop a servant attitude during his time of obscurity, God is also teaching him and us how to avoid the pitfalls of position, power and privileges.

1. God-ward accountability: Never forget that God put you in the position you're in today to serve as His stewards, no matter how high or low that position may seem. Thus, no matter how high or low you may be in where God has placed you, He is holding you accountable.

One common reason why people in high position stray away is because they have no or they have lost their reverential fear of God. They dabble themselves in ways and things that are displeasing to God.

Many in spiritual leadership like to quote Heb 13:17: "Obey your spiritual leaders and be willing to do what they say. For their work is to watch over your souls and God will judge them on how well they do."

They like that part "obey your spiritual leaders". But I think Heb 13:17 ought to put fear into their hearts because it goes on to say "God will judge them".

Indeed, every authority used by God is accountable to Him; every servant used by God is accountable to Him. As a prince of Egypt, Moses in his prominence was accountable to God. As a shepherd watching over sheep and serving others in a foreign land, Moses in his obscurity was still accountable to God. And when we are keenly aware of our God-ward accountability, we serve with fear of Him who entrusts to us all that we are to watch over.

2. Others-centred love: There are few people in the history of the world that had more potential to position, power, and privileges than Moses. In fact, he was very much in line for the No. 1 position as ruler of the most successful nation of the world at that time—Egypt.

However, he was eventually stripped of all his royal prominence because he had to flee for killing an Egyptian. But the fact remains that he was prepared to risk losing all his princely honour and glory for his love of people who were oppressed and downtrodden.

And when he was in Midian, he served as a shepherd in a foreign land with unselfish devotion to people who had accepted him and entrusted their well-being to him. He served them and their interests, not considering what he could get out of them BUT what he could give them in God's love.

He did not abuse their trust in him. Rather, he served them with love, humility and integrity. Indeed, if you really love people you're not going to abuse and misuse them; not focusing so much on your rights but more on your responsibilities.

When Moses was in Midian, the Lord was taking time to refine him such that he would grow in God's way.

God's hand in Moses' obscurity is seen in Him teaching Moses this lesson: God can use our obscurity to test and help us grow in His way such that we serve with accountability and love even in little things.

The test of obscurity is often seen in how we respond to do even little things in God's way.

Lastly and briefly, let's consider what God has to teach us in our own sense of desperation by looking at the desperation of Moses and that of the Hebrew people in Egypt.

III. The Beginning that Desperation Brings (vv. 23-25)

Verses 23-25 takes us back to Egypt. The Pharaoh who sought to kill Moses had died. But Israel was still suffering in bondage. Now, it is recorded for the first time that they cried out for help and their cry rose up to God. This is the first mention of God in Exodus 2. It shows that the forty additional years of suffering while Moses was hiding in the desert not only served to prepare Moses for God's people; it also prepared God's people for Moses.

Verses 24-25: "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."

What a beautiful string of active verbs—God heard, remembered, looked on, concerned about. Amidst your trials as you cry and groan out, God hears, God sees, and God knows.

And God does all of this because He remembers; He remembers His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promised Abraham to be a God to him and to his children and to his children's children, to give him a land, to multiply them, to make them a great nation, and in his seed to bless the nations.

But when Israel (Jacob) first settled with his descendants in Egypt, there were only seventy of them (Ex 1:5). Their later generations became enslaved in Egypt. It did seem to the Israelites that God had forgotten them.

But the fact is this—they had since multiplied and prospered in great numbers (maybe 2 million of them by this time). And the Pharaoh who did not know Joseph was threatened by their growing might in numbers. So he first plotted to oppress them in slave labour, and later ordered that all newly born Hebrew male babies be secretly killed by the attending midwives (Ex 1).

But God was indeed working things together—from the brutality of Pharaoh, to the courage of the midwives who spared baby Moses, to the compassion of the Egyptian princess, to the royal education in the pagan court of Pharaoh, to even the murderous action of Moses, and then to his forty years being humbled in the desert. God had ordered and superintended over all these events to keep His promises to Israel and to prepare for them a deliverer to come one day.

Now, Pharaoh Senior had died. But there was no celebration for the Hebrew slaves. Their suffering under the bondage of slavery continued. So they groaned and cried out, but to whom? They were crying aloud to God ... and God heard them (v. 24). In their desperation, they cried out to God, and not to Moses or the new Pharaoh or any other man.

Moses was desperate, fled out of Egypt, and God provided and cared for him, and prepared him for a great rescue mission—i.e. to deliver the Hebrew slaves out of Egyptian bondage. The Hebrew slaves were desperate and they cried out to God. And God heard, remembered, looked on, and was concerned about them. And he acted according to His covenantal promises and faithfulness to deliver them.

The lesson that God is teaching us in our own sense of desperation is this: Our cry of desperation is not wits' end but a wise beginning if it is the beginning of us looking to God and not to man.

If in your desperation you are still looking more to man and less to God, you are still not desperate enough; you have still not hit rock bottom; you are still trying to do things in human ways.

Conclusion

Moses is a type of Christ in the OT. His work from God points to the mission of Jesus Christ here on earth. Jesus Christ came down from His heavenly prominence with the Father in Heaven to earthly obscurity as a carpenter who was born of lowly parents. And God the Father sent Him as His Deliverer to us. Jesus Christ came to die for us so that you and I can be delivered from the penalty of sin which is eternal separation from God. Jesus Christ was also raised from the dead so that we who have believed and received Him into our lives can have eternal life with God in heavenly bliss.

If you want to know more about Jesus Christ as the One sent to deliver humankind from the bondage of sin and eternal separation from God, we invite you to talk with us after the service. We will be most happy to share more with you.

For those of us who are the people of God in Jesus Christ, the Word of God today teaches and reminds us this—in our prominence, obscurity, and even desperation, let's look to God only, do our level best in our God-given roles, so that we can see Him working and walking with us in our every situation.