

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 3 of 7)

“Who Made You Judge Over Us?”

Exodus 2:11-25

Mark Vroegop

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.” 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, ESV)

A.W. Tozer (1897-1963), a Christian Missionary Alliance pastor and author of *The Knowledge of the Holy*, famously said, “It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.” Do you understand what Tozer means?

He is talking about how God often makes people useful for kingdom purposes by bringing them through deep waters, difficult times, and personal hardships. Tozer is referring to the way that God often prepares future leaders by trials or by their own failures. In order for a person to be used by God, he or she often has to be deconstructed. Listen to what Jesus said in John 12.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me (John 12:24–26a, ESV).

In Jesus we see this model of life, ministry, and leadership clearly combined. But we also hear it in Paul's life, when he appealed to the Lord for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. God's answer and Paul's response are very instructive:

⁹ 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 (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV).

Do you see what is going on here? When it comes to God's kingdom and the people He uses, brokenness precedes usefulness. Before God can use a person, that person must be broken. He or she must come to an end of trusting in self and agree with Paul: "... when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

God's Goal is His Glory

The reason that God operates this way is because the goal of everything in life, including everything that we do in service of God, is the glory of God. Life, ministry, success, and redemption are about Him – not us!

Now we see this very clearly in the New Testament, but we also see this focus begin to dawn in the book of Exodus. This book, as we saw the last two weeks, is not about Israel, nor is it about Moses; it is about God. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the Ten Plagues, the Ten Commandments, and God's eventual abiding in the tabernacle are not designed to make much of Israel. Rather, the redemptive acts of God are designed to say something powerful about God.

Moses understood this very, very well. More than any other person in biblical history, Moses was near the presence and glory of God. So it makes sense when Moses is telling the story of Israel's deliverance and his role as its leader that he would record his own failure. Moses shows us how brokenness preceded usefulness in his own life.

Last week we saw the way in which God moved in a surprising way with the saving of a baby who would eventually be a deliverer. And prior to that, we learned how dark and hopeless the situation was for Israel in Egypt. This week we will see how Moses is broken before he is useful to God – brokenness precedes usefulness.

Two Seasons of Moses' Life

Our text today (Exodus 2:11-25), provides us an instructive glimpse into two of three seasons of Moses' life. It appears that his life is divided into three forty-year sections. In Acts 7:23 we find that Moses was forty years old when "it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel." And then we find, according to Acts 4:30, it was another forty years until God spoke to him at the burning bush (a text we will look at in two weeks). From Deuteronomy 34:7 we learn that Moses was 120 years old when he died.

Each season of his life is important because of what it tells us about Moses, the character of God, and God's plan to save His people. It is a fascinating story of a leader who would be very useful, but who first must be broken. Let's look at these two seasons and see what we learn about Moses, ourselves, and how all of this relates to Jesus.

Season 1: Commendable but imperfect

In verse eleven we see that much has transpired since we learned in verse ten that Moses was given his name, which meant "drawn out of the water." As I said earlier, it is likely that forty years have elapsed between verses 10 and 11. During that time Moses was raised in the royal family and educated in all the ways of the Egyptian culture. Acts 7:22 says, "And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds." Moses enjoyed a life of highest privilege, wealth, education, and comfort. He had "grown up" as an Egyptian.

However, at some point in his adult journey, Moses became burdened over the plight of his people – the Israelites. If you read verse 11 too casually, the text can feel like Moses accidentally discovered the oppression of the Israelites. But there is more here, and there are clues in this text as to what is going on inside of Moses. Notice the following:

- We see the phrase "his people" (literally "his brothers) twice in verse 11 – "he went out to his own people" and "one of his people." Moses was identifying himself, not as Egyptian, but as an Israelite.
- The term "went out" is used throughout the Old Testament to describe how God brought Israel out of Egypt.¹ This would have been a familiar term to those hearing the story. The one who will lead the Exodus is making an exodus.
- To "look on their burden" has a strong emotional overtone to it. It means to see with emotional distress. Moses shares God's heart for his people, and he sees what is happening to them.²

However, it is the writer of Hebrews who gives us the greatest commentary on what is happening in Moses' heart:

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward (Hebrews 11:24–26, ESV).

The book of Hebrews identifies that at some point in his life Moses made a conscious choice to side with God's people even if that meant difficulty or hardship. He is listed as an example of someone who valued God's kingdom –even at great personal cost. He was looking for the greater reward.

¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus – The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2000), 79.

² R. Alan Cole, *Exodus – Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 66.

Therefore, it seems that this visit to see the burdens of the Israelites was not an isolated or unusual thing for Moses to do. He likely was growing increasingly uncomfortable with what was happening and was trying to determine what could be done to stop it. Moses wanted to find a way to free his people.

In verse 11 we learn that on one of Moses' tours he witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. This beating was likely life-threatening to the Hebrew slave, and Moses decided to intervene. In verse 12 we get a sense that Moses was concerned about who might see this intervention – "he looked this way and that . . ." To advocate or physically rescue a slave from this kind of beating would have revealed where his true allegiance lay.

Moses, who was likely militarily trained, killed the Egyptian, saved the slave, and hid the dead body of the Egyptian slave master in the sand. It is very obvious in the text that there is a tone of secrecy. Moses' actions were dangerous.

In verse 13 we learn that Moses went out again the next day. Perhaps this had become a pattern for him – a daily appraisal of what was happening. Another situation presented itself, but this time it was two Israelites who were "struggling together." Moses broke up the fight between these two Israelites and began to scold one of the men: "Why do you strike your companion?" The slave who was scolded took umbrage with Moses' lecturing, and he said (v 14), "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

You can hear the sarcasm in the statement, can't you? The slave called into question Moses' credibility. By using the terms "prince" and "judge," he is saying, "Who do you think you are? Who made you our leader?" He was attacking Moses' self-determined role in delivering the people of Israel. What's more, the slave added some scandal to his push-back: "I know that you killed an Egyptian." Moses' presumptuous action of killing the Egyptian slave master was apparently known. His good heart and good motives had produced actions that were disdained by the very people he wanted to help. Acts 7:25 says "He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand." Doug Stuart, in his commentary on this passage, gives us the following insight into what may have been happening here:

It is not difficult to imagine why Moses was disliked or why the news about his murderous act had spread so far so fast: an Egyptian overseer was missing, an investigation probably was underway or soon would be, and there was every likelihood that the Hebrews would be blamed and severely punished for the overseer's murder. Such a situation would become the talk of the community and would easily surface someone's admission, "I saw who did it!" What Moses had tried to do had, from his people's point of view, backfired. He had taken matters into his own hands, and his arrogance in doing so probably was going to get a lot of people in trouble.³

³ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 97.

This is a pattern that will develop throughout Moses' leadership and ministry. He will be constantly accused of doing things that create problems. When Pharaoh refuses to give people straw for bricks (Exodus 5), he'll be accused of "making us stink in the sight of Pharaoh," when the army of Pharaoh is approaching with the Red Sea in front of them (Exodus 14), he's told "we asked you to leave us alone," and when the people are hungry (Exodus 16), the people will say "you brought us out in this wilderness to kill us by starvation." One of the subplots of this book is the manner in which Moses' leadership is continually questioned, challenged, and rejected.

Israel's opposition of Moses began here. Now, and throughout the book of Exodus, Moses exhibits amazing meekness. In fact, Numbers 12:3 says that "Moses was very meek, more than all the people who were on the face of the earth." And it is likely that he learned this lesson the hard way – through failure and rejection.

Moses was now in trouble because (14b) his killing of the Egyptian was known, and it would only be a matter of time until Pharaoh would learn about it. Verse 15 confirms this. Pharaoh took action, probably because he was concerned about a member of the royal family giving aid to the Israelite slaves; he probably feared an insurrection. Therefore, Moses had to flee.

Moses was commendable in his desires and affections, but his actions led to some hard, but foundational, lessons.

Season 2: Broken but not useless

In the first season of Moses' life we see a man who is commendable but not perfect. During the second season of his life, he is broken but not useless. It is important for you to remember that the next season of Moses' life is 40 years long. When he fled Egypt, he had no intention of ever returning. He was a marked man.

Our text tells us that Moses fled to the land of Midian. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6), and it is interesting to note that it was likely the Midianites (called "Ishmaelites") who brought Joseph to Egypt after purchasing him from his angry brothers (see Gen. 37:25ff). Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites had conflict with the Midianites, as in the story of Gideon (Judges 7-8). But at this time, Moses would have found safety with those who were distant relatives.

The Midianites were known as nomadic desert-dwellers, and the text does not specify where exactly they were living. However, if you look ahead to Exodus 3:1, you will see what is coming:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God (Exodus 3:1, ESV)

Do you know another name for Mt. Horeb? Mt. Sinai. For over forty years, Moses lived in the wilderness, visited the "mountain of God," and learned some valuable lessons for his future leadership of the people of Israel.

In verse 15 we learn that when Moses fled to Midian, he providentially came to a well where he rested. Due to the arid environment, a well was a place with a lot of activity. In verse 16 we are introduced to the “priest of Midian,” who is also called Reuel in verse 18 and Jethro in Exodus 18. The name differences are related to a clan name versus a personal name.⁴

The text also tells us that the priest of Midian had seven daughters, who were driven away from watering their flocks by the other shepherds who were there. However, verse 17 says, “But Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock.” Now if you’ve seen the movie *The Ten Commandments*, you’ll remember that Moses “goes Ninja” on the unkind shepherds, and that the daughters are pretty impressed.

But the story shows more than Moses’ combat skills and bravery. It demonstrates that Moses is still concerned about alleviating suffering and unfair treatment. Apparently Moses didn’t succumb to a “I’m-never-getting-involved-again” mentality that is often the case with people who have tried to do what is right and who have been misunderstood. Moses has a heart of compassion even in disappointing circumstances. Even in his “exile,” Moses is still able to do what is right.

Can that be said of you? Is there room in your understanding of God and difficult circumstances to still be engaged in Kingdom work? Can you serve and minister to people even when your life is disappointing?

From there the story progresses pretty quickly.

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” (Exodus 2:16–20).

Moses met the father of these seven daughters, and one of them – Zipporah – became Moses’ wife. We next learn that Moses and Zipporah were blessed with the birth of a son, and his name was very significant. He was called Gershom, and the meaning of the name is supplied for us. It means “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land” (v 23). Here we get a sense of Moses’ perspective on his life. He viewed himself as an exile, a nomad, and a wanderer. He had left everything in Egypt, and the name of his son reflects that.

Do you remember the last time we heard the name of a child? It was with Moses in Exodus 2:10, and now we see another baby whose name is significant. Moses’ name implied that deliverance was coming. Gershom’s name implies that these are hard days for Moses. But lest you should think that all hope is lost, the text ends with the entrance of God. The deliverer has been introduced, his failure has been highlighted, and he has been learning hard lessons in Midian.

⁴ Stuart, 99 – note 146.

Then the text turns:

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).

Notice that “God heard,” “God remembered,” “God saw,” and “God knew.” Exodus is very clear: God is going to deliver His people. Moses will be the instrument but only after he is broken and rebuilt.

Brokenness precedes usefulness.

Lessons from Moses’ Early Days

There is a reason why Moses recorded this part of the story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. There are valuable lessons to learn here. Let me give you three.

1. Self-sufficiency is incompatible with spiritual leadership

Moses needed to learn a lesson that we all need to learn: self-sufficiency doesn’t work with God. The essence of the gospel message is that human beings are helpless sinners who need a Savior. The Bible constantly reminds us about this with statements such as “what do you have that you didn’t receive” (1 Cor. 4:7) and “what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded” (Rom 3:27). Receiving Jesus as your savior means that you’ve come to the end of your own ability and that you throw yourself upon the mercy and work of Jesus. Self-sufficiency and salvation do not work together.

The problem with self-sufficiency doesn’t stop with conversion; it extends into how Christians are to live. Paul cites the example of Jesus in Philippians 2 as the way that we are to live:

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–8).

Humility, dependency, and trust in God are requirements for spiritual leadership, not just because they work; they are required because of who God is.

An interesting parallel can be drawn from Moses’ actions and the testing of Jesus in the wilderness. What was the primary temptation offered to Jesus? It was for him to do things in His own power to meet His own needs, to prove who He was, and to achieve immediate “victory.” Self-sufficiency was the core of the temptation.

2. Good motives are no assurance that you will make the right decisions

Moses is commended because he had the right heart, but it is interesting to see here that right motives can still lead you down a wrong path. Further, it is remarkable how quickly and easily one can move from having the right intentions to doing things in the wrong way. Godly people who

understand this are inclined to not trust themselves or be over-confident in their decision-making ability. Look at what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5.

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

3. Some of the best lessons come from the worst moments

These two seasons in Moses' life will mark him forever. He has entered God's seminary, a training ground of pain and failure. Yet even his failure and the requirement that he flee will prove to be useful in what God is forming in Moses' heart.

This was also the perspective of Paul when it came to his past and his circumstances:

15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

I'm sure that you can look back on your life and see that some of the worst moments of your life were actually some of the greatest moments of learning and growth. Some of the darkest days produce the greatest insight. Therefore we must be careful, when our motives are pure, to not be too overconfident, and we must be careful that when we are experiencing difficulties that we not assume that there is no point.

Brokenness precedes usefulness. We see this so clearly in Moses' life, but we also see it in Paul, Peter, and even in Jesus. The gospel itself is rooted here.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

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