

A Savior Is Born?

Exodus 2:1-22

When the game is on the line—you're down by five points, it's 4th and goal with 12 seconds on the clock; or the bottom of the ninth, down by three, bases loaded—when the game is on the line, you're not going to call some no-name rookie off the bench to make the critical play. Nobody does that. You're going to call in the big guns—Big Papi, Gronkowski, someone known for showing up when it counts. Someone with the power to make the big play, to deliver the team from the clutches of defeat and bring them safely to a glorious victory.

And this is true for any time we face a critical challenge in life. No one asks a first-year med student to perform their heart transplant; we want head of cardiology at Mass General or the Shapiro Center. No one assigns the million-dollar client to the intern. No one wants a public defender if they find themselves in court; they want a big shot attorney—someone whose reputation strikes fear into the hearts of prosecutors everywhere.

When we find ourselves in trouble, we want a hero. A champion. Someone with the power and influence to deliver us and get things done. Those are the kinds of people our culture celebrates. And you can imagine that that's who ancient Israel was looking for as they found themselves enslaved by a tyrant in Egypt. Someone to deliver them. Someone to defend them and take up their cause. Someone who will leverage their power to put Pharaoh in his place. Someone . . . very different from the man they actually get, Moses.

Exodus 2 introduces us to one of the major characters of the next four books of the Bible—Moses, the servant of the Lord. A man who is celebrated as a pillar of ancient Israel's history—the mediator through whom God made his covenant with Israel, the man who actually wrote most of Genesis through Deuteronomy—but whose story starts out with suspense and suspicion, anticipation, disappointment, and doubt.

That's if you allow yourself to get caught up in the story. So often when we read stories in the Bible that are somewhat familiar to us, we plow through them and actually miss what the narrator is doing, how they are telling the story, and therefore how they are trying to get their message across. And so when you read biblical narratives, you have to apply what I call the "Cornflakes strategy." Several years ago, Cornflakes cereal ran an advertising campaign with the slogan, "Taste them again for the first time." That's what we need to do with stories like this: *read it again for the first time*. Pretend for a moment like you don't know what's coming next. Allow yourself to get caught up in the suspense and unfolding drama of the story, because it is through the story that we see God.

And this story starts off with incredible suspense. If you remember from last week in ch. 1, we met a new king in Egypt who saw the fulfillment of God's plan and promises as a threat. A king who thought he could outsmart God and thwart his plan in pursuit of his own. He tried several tactics to try and stop Israel from flourishing, first by enslaving them and forcing them into hard labor, and second by attempting to kill the male babies. But nothing worked; twice we're told that Israel continued to multiply and grow in strength (1:12, 20). There is no opposition in heaven or on earth that can stop God from accomplishing his plan through his people.

But Pharaoh had one more trick up his sleeve. Chapter 1 ended with Pharaoh commanding all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live" (1:22). It's on this note, or under this cloud, that chapter 2 begins, narrowing the focus from "every son" to a specific son, and unfolding in two movements: first, from death sentence to privilege, and then from privilege to obscurity.

From Death Sentence to Privilege (2:1-10)

Look at v. 1: "Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son . . ." (2:1-2a). What's remarkable about this first verse is that by itself, it's rather unremarkable. It's the kind of line you read in any biblical story. It's the normal course of life. Boy meets girl. They fall in love, get married, have a baby. And yet in the context of Israel's oppression, what is otherwise normal is a powerful act of defiance. Life will find a way. Even in the harshest conditions, God's plan for human flourishing finds a way to break through to the surface.

It's not unlike what's happening in some of the Syrian refugee camps in Greece right now. Several weeks ago, producers from the podcast *This American Life* spent time in five refugee camps in Greece, some of which were impromptu—thrown together at a gas stations or rest stops, which became home to literally thousands of people. And one of the things that struck them was how despite the suffering of their recent past and the tragedy of being displaced, normal life still happened. People fell in love, got married, had children. Life found a way.

And so ch. 2 starts with this simple, beautiful act of defiance. And yet there is ominous cloud hanging over it, one dark enough to suck every ounce of joy from what ought to have been one of life's sweetest experiences. This baby is born under a death sentence. He is a son.

And he is the son of two Levites—a tribe that will eventually be known for the priesthood, but who up to this point in the story is known mainly for their violent slaughter of all the males in the city of Shechem (back in Genesis 34). It's dangerously ironic. Will Levi now get what's coming to him? Will he receive from Egypt what he did to Shechem? What will happen?

What happens is the love of a mother. Again, the simple beauty of normal life operating in quiet defiance against Pharaoh. Verse 2 again: "The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months." She knew what Pharaoh commanded. She knew what she was supposed to do, and the risk for not complying. Yet as soon as she laid eyes on her son, she knew she couldn't do it. She risked her life to protect her child and hide him from the Egyptians who had been ordered to seize him and kill him.

It's hard to imagine the kind of fear and worry that must have consumed their life. Babies are not quiet; it's hard to hide a baby in your home. What if someone hears? It reminds me of the story of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian whose family hid Jews in Holland during World War 2. She tells the story of when their home was raided by the Gestapo. They had a secret room in the house, where their Jewish guests were hidden. But one little girl, Mary, was ill. And as the soldiers came up the steps, Corrie could hear her rasping breathing on the other side of the wall. She remembers praying, "Lord Jesus! . . . You have the power to heal! Heal Mary now!" And in that moment, she could no longer hear Mary's breathing. Corrie was arrested, but the Jews were safe.¹

So it was, for three months the Levite mother was able to hide her son. But there came a time when that was simply no longer possible. Having no other options, she finally gave way to Pharaoh's decree, but in her own creative way. Verse 3: "When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him" (2:3-4).

You cannot underestimate the role that the love of a mother played in the deliverance of God's people, beginning with the protection of this son. A son born under a death sentence to a mother who refuses to give up hope. And yet it is now completely out of her hands. And though God feels very absent from this part of the story, we hear echoes of his sovereign care even in the way this mom protected her son. Daubing a basket with pitch or tar to make it water tight to create a little boat for the baby, reminds us the time when God commanded Noah to cover the sides of the ark with pitch back in Genesis 6. In fact, the word translated "basket" here is the same word translated "ark" in Genesis 6-9, and it's used nowhere else in the Old Testament except to describe these two vessels. There is a silent, subtle hand of care at work to protect the life of this boy. Who is he? What will he become?

Even his mom wants to know the answer to that question. So she sends her daughter to find out what would happen to him. And what happens is nothing short of miraculous, almost hilarious when you consider the lengths to which Pharaoh has gone in trying to thwart God.

Again, there's a fair amount of suspense at first. Verse 5: "Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it." Of all the people to discover the child, it's not just an Egyptian, but the very daughter of the king who issued the death sentence. This cannot be good. But once again, life finds a way, this time through the love of a new mother. Verse 6: "When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.'"

Here is a woman under obligation not just to her king but to her father, to destroy the life of any male Hebrew children she finds. But like the baby's mother, when she saw the child, something happened. Motherly compassion triumphed over national loyalty. And that love triumphed not only for the baby, but for his family as well. His sister, in a very bold move, offers to find a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for her. Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and the sister brings the baby's own mother, to whom Pharaoh's daughter not only returns her son for a season,

¹ See Corrie ten Boom and John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 127.

but actually *pays* her to raise him. “When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, ‘Because,’ she said, ‘I drew him out of the water’” (2:10). The son goes from a death sentence to privilege, being raised in the very home of the man who sought his life.

In fact, the irony is thick in this chapter. One author summarizes:

(1) Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destructions (the Nile) is the means for saving Moses. (2) As in 1:15-22, the daughters are allowed to live, and it is they who now proceed to thwart Pharaoh's plans. (3) The mother saves Moses by following Pharaoh's orders (with her own twist). (4) A member of Pharaoh's own family undermines his policies, saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the Dynasty. (5) Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew girl's advice! . . . (6) The mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do, and from Pharaoh's own budget . . . !²

This is the loyal love of God. When all looks lost, and God feels silent and distant, because God is a God of life, life finds a way. He will be faithful to accomplish his plan for creation and fulfill his covenant promises. And it looks like we've met the hero through whom he's going to do this.

Who better to lead God's people to freedom and victory than this child, Moses? A boy taken from death sentence to privilege, growing up in Pharaoh's own household—a man on the inside. Educated by the best of Egyptian wisdom (cf. Acts 7:22). He'll have power and influence. He's perfectly positioned to lead a rebellion for God's people. Here, finally, is the hero we've been looking for.

Yet as the story moves forward, our expectations begin to erode along with Moses' credibility.

From Privilege to Obscurity (2:11-22)

Verse 11 introduces the second movement of our story—from privilege to obscurity—as Moses' life begins to unravel, and with it, our confidence that God has indeed raised up a savior for his people. We fast-forward to Moses' adulthood and read this: “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. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” (2:11-12).

Here the portrait of Moses the hero begins to get fuzzy. On the one hand he knows his heritage. Despite being raised as an Egyptian, he identifies with the Hebrews people. He even makes the effort to go out to look upon their burdens. And when he sees one of them being mistreated, he sides with the Israelite. He wants to bring justice, so much that he strikes down and kills the Egyptian slave master. Is this Moses the deliverer we see?

And yet, there is a strong sense that what Moses did was actually wrong. The secretive nature of it—he looks this way and that to make sure no one else is around, and then afterwards hides the body. Moses seems to know that what he is doing is wrong. Moreover, though he identifies with the Israelites, he can't really relate to them. He has to go *out* in order to look on their sufferings,

² Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 37.

because he does not share their sufferings with them. He's been shielded from them his whole life, raised in luxury, a position of power and privilege. Which one might think would prepare him to be a hero. But as we'll see, his fellow Hebrews don't see it that way.

Verse 13 tells us that the next day he went out again, and this time sees two Hebrews fighting each other. And again, seeking to bring justice, "he said to the man in the wrong, 'Why do you strike your companion?'" Moses sees himself as someone who's trying to help. His Hebrew brothers don't see it that way. The man 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.' 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" (2:14-15).

In the course of two days, Moses spirals from privilege to obscurity. He goes from trying to deliver one of his brothers to needing to be rescued himself. His life is now in danger, and he's been rejected by the very people we thought he would save.

His obscurity is reinforced by what happens when he arrives at Midian, a region northwest of Egypt. Verse 16 tells us that "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" (2:16-17). That's the Savior we're looking for—Moses again acting on behalf of the oppressed. But his identity is drifting into obscurity. When the daughters explain to their father what happened, they said "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock" (2:19). *An Egyptian?* Who is this Moses? Does he even know anymore?

The answer that this movement in the story leaves us with is *no*. Moses, who was born a Hebrew slave, raised as Egyptian royalty, has now been rejected by both, and resigns himself to live in obscurity, settling down with a new people in a new place, away from all he's ever known, and safely insulated from Israel's suffering. The story began with a son born under a death sentence, who became the son of privilege. It now ends with a new son being born whose name expresses Moses' new reality: "Gershom," which sounds like the Hebrew for sojourner, *wanderer*, a man without a people or a home. "For he said, 'I have been a sojourner in a foreign land'" (2:22).

And as those reading this story again for the first time, we're not sure what to make of Moses either. Is this really the man God will use to deliver his people? Weak, obscure, defeated, in hiding? Where's the thunder? Where's the charisma? Where's the drive to get things done for God? To be the hero God needs him to be? This is not the leader we're looking for.

But God often accomplishes his plans in surprising ways. Just because he doesn't work out his plan the way we think he should, doesn't mean he's not working. And if we think he's not working unless he's working according to our expectations, we might just miss what he's doing, or who he's doing it through.

If we think that God only works through the extraordinary, we'll miss how he often uses very ordinary means to accomplish his plans. The simple defiance of two people falling in love, getting married, and having a baby. The love of a mother that does everything to protect her son, and in the process changes the world. Sometimes we think that unless we do something big and bold, God can't use us. And God sometimes calls us to big and bold things, and he calls, we need

to obey. But he also uses the ordinary. Going to work. Loving your family. Praying with your kids. Inviting a friend to church. Teaching Sunday School.

Most people have heard the name D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist of the nineteenth century, who preached the gospel to tens of thousands of people in his life, and started two schools in Massachusetts and what is now Moody Bible Institute and Moody Church in Chicago. But few people have heard the name Edward Kimball. Kimball was a Sunday School teacher at a church here in Boston. Nobody's written a book about him. He doesn't have a Wikipedia page. He taught Sunday School. And one of his students was a young man named Dwight Moody. A man whom he visited at work one day, at a shoe store on Court Street, and led Moody to Christ.

He taught a Sunday School class, and God changed the world. There is a quiet providence at work in the ordinary things of life.

God is also at work through unsuspecting, ordinary people. Moses wasn't the leader Israel was looking for. He spent his first 40 years in luxury. He's not the leader we were looking for either; he spent his next 40 in obscurity. But what we often forget is that God chooses the weak and obscure to accomplish his plans. That it's actually Moses' weakness and obscurity that equips him for the role God will call him to play. God is preparing his servant, not by making him great, but making him humble. Not by giving him power, but by making him dependent. Moses is an example of what Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

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 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.

God often accomplishes his plans in surprising ways, through surprising people. This was true of Moses. It's true of us. It was also true of Christ.

Just like Moses wasn't the leader Israel expected, so Jesus wasn't the king that Israel was looking for. For some, they wanted a champion to stand up to Rome and throw off their oppressive rule, if necessary, through violent force (e.g. John 6:15). Others wanted a king they could control, not someone who deserved their allegiance (e.g. John 11:47-50).

And so when Jesus came on the scene saying crazy things like "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), the Jews didn't have a category for that. When he claimed to be the Son of God and Son of Man, they killed him. They rejected him, just like the Israelites did to Moses. In fact, this was the point that Stephen made in his sermon in Acts 7.

This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge?"—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." (7:35-37).

And it's this prophet that the Jews in Stephen's day betrayed and murdered, nailing him to a cross. They rejected him, just like their fathers rejected Moses, because he didn't fit their

categories (cf. Acts 7:51-53). And sometimes he doesn't fit ours, either. We want a Savior who will rescue us from our problems. Who will help us achieve our dreams and realize our potential. A savior who's always available to help, but doesn't ask too much from us. We want a savior who will still let us be king. And when Jesus doesn't do his work according to our expectations, it's tempting to look for a different savior, or stop looking altogether.

But if Israel could miss what God was doing through Moses, we can miss what God has done through Christ. The temptation here is not only to miss out on being used by God, but to miss the One whom God ultimately uses—the prophet like Moses, the one true Savior and King, Jesus.

Who would have thought that Israel could be delivered through an obscure shepherd, who forsook his privileged status through murder, and was disowned by both Israel and Egypt? Who would have thought that the whole world could be delivered through an obscure carpenter, raised in Nazareth, rejected by his people, and nailed to a cross?

Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:1-6)

God often accomplishes his plans in surprising ways through surprising people. People like Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. If you had to write the job description for the kind of savior ancient Israel needed, what would be some of the key qualifications and characteristics?
2. How does that list compare to what we look for in leaders today?

Questions for Study and Understanding

3. What is the problem at the end of ch. 1 that makes what happens in vv. 1-2 quite extraordinary?
4. To what lengths does the mother go to protect the child?
5. Though God seems absent in this story, what evidence do we see of his work in the protection and preservation of Moses?

6. What happens when Moses grows up and goes out to look on his people, and how does that affect our view of Moses?
7. How is Moses characterized by the end of the story? What impact does that have on the story?
8. In what ways does the experience of Moses in this chapter parallel Jesus' experience?

Questions for Reflection and Application

9. What do we learn here about God ways in the accomplishment his plans?
10. What do we learn here about the kinds of leaders God uses?
11. Are there areas of your personal life or ministry that this passage speaks to (e.g. ways it encourages, comforts, challenges, redirects)?