

WILDERNESS STUDIES

The Life of Moses: Deliverance through Faith.

Exodus 2:11-25

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One of my favorite quotes is from Chuck Swindoll. He said, “*When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible individual and crushes him.*” It reminds me of a potter working with clay. The potter smashed down the clay so that he can build it up into something useful for him. Chances are, if you know someone that God is using and that you would consider a spiritual person, that person has been through crushing experiences in life that God has used to shape them. One of those crushing experiences is personal failure. The believers you look up to who seem to be in touch with the Lord and know His ways, most likely are that way because they’ve learned the hard way by not doing things His way. That’s why I believe sometimes the best education you’ll ever receive is in the school of failure and Moses is about to get his PhD in wilderness studies.

I. **MOSES’ FAILURE IN EGYPT. (Ex. 2:11-14; Acts 7:21-29)**

As we resume the story of Moses’ life, you should know that from where we left off last week in verse 10 and where we pick it up this week in verse 11, **forty years** have elapsed. But don’t worry – we’re not even close to being done with Moses’ life – that’s only the first 1/3 of his life. His life according to Acts 7 can be divided up into 3 periods of 40 years each. He spends the first 40 years in Egypt thinking he’s something, the second 40 years in the desert learning he’s nothing, and the last 40 years proving God to be everything. If you’re following along in the notes, I’ve emboldened some key words and phrases for us.

*11 Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. 12 So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 He went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting with each other; and he said to the offender, “Why are you striking your companion?” 14 But he said, “Who made you a **prince** or a **judge** over us? Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and said, “Surely the matter has become known.”*

We also need to read a parallel passage, **Acts 7:21-29**. This is Stephen’s testimony about Moses:

*21 And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and **nurtured** him as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was **a man of power in words and deeds**. 23 But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 And **he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand**. 26 On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting*

*together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a **ruler** and **judge** over us? 28 You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?' 29 At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.*

So again, **forty years** have passed at this point in Moses' life. After being weaned as a young child by his mother, he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter into Pharaoh's family. So he goes from a mud hut to a palace overnight. Many also believe he would have been next in line for the throne and if nothing else, a **ruler** or **judge** of some kind in Pharaoh's court. Moses at this point in his life has the world at his fingertips, being **nurtured** in the best of Egypt with unlimited wealth and pleasures (Acts 7:21).

As for his **education**, some Jewish traditions and extrabiblical sources say Moses was trained at the Temple of the Sun, which was like the Oxford of the day. This is a place where noble families from Egypt and surrounding nations were educated. His **informal** education probably included swimming, riding horses, shooting bows, and hunting.¹ His **formal** education included linguistics (reading and writing) which would prove helpful for writing the Pentateuch. He probably developed a love for music here, which would later use to write triumphant songs of God's victories. He also probably studied art, religion and theology, mathematics, science, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, and law. No doubt it's where he learned how to walk like an Egyptian (j/k). But with all that said, he's a sharp individual! Stephen says he was a **man of power and words** – both a statesman and a soldier with the peoples' respect. People bowed the knee to Moses. He was an inspiring, competent leader. According to historian Josephus, by the time he was thirty he had proven himself a victorious military commander, which will be useful later when he engages in battles with Israel.

So while there's a lot about the circumstances surrounding Moses' birth and childhood we would change, we have to remember God is carefully directing, arranging, and crafting the circumstances so that Moses is the perfect man for the divine task to lead Israel out of Egypt. **God is preparing this man to be Israel's deliverer.** God knows what He's doing, and He'll use it all. It reminds me of what Paul said in Galatians that he was set apart to be an apostle from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15). Everything he went through in life was God preparing him for a divine task. God does the same with us too. But as important as his Egyptian education is to his divine task, he is not ready to lead God's people. He needs an education in the wilderness first.

But before we get to the failure that leads to the wilderness, we should note what the NT says about Moses at this point in his life. Even though Moses was clearly groomed to be an Egyptian, he never forgot his Hebrew origins and his loyalty remained with the God of the Hebrews. Hebrews 11 says he acted in **faith**: "24 **By faith** Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, 26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward." We don't know how long Jochebed (Moses' mother) had to nurse Moses, but it could have been a few years. She could have instilled in his heart a love for God. If not, he was at least aware of the fact that he was a Hebrew, aware he was adopted, and learned about the God of the Hebrews. Either way, Moses

never forgot his origins and at this time in his life he experienced a **turning point**. He made the noble, monumental decision to **identify with God's people** and the expected Messiah. He left all the worldly, Egyptian pleasures behind to be with them.

But just like many new and/or zealous believers do when hit that turning point in their lives, he failed to distinguish between passion and principle.² Though sincere and sympathetic towards his brethren, he makes the mistake of **striking down an Egyptian**. Isn't it amazing how we can make a good and noble decision one second, and a wrong, even sinful one, the next? It reminds us of Peter who is praised for his testimony and spiritual insight one second and then rebuked by Jesus for Satanic comments the next (Matt. 16:15-23). But I think Moses at this point is already on his way out of Pharaoh's family. He knows it. Pharaoh knows it. And he understands that God wants to use him to be Israel's **deliverer** – in fact Acts says *“he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance.”* I think he thought he was going to prove his loyalty to the Hebrews, and they'll realize he's God's deliverer and would rally around him. However, the opposite happens. They don't understand. And he has to **flee to the wilderness** where he gets his 40 year PhD in “Wilderness Studies.” We might call it an MBSD – *Master of the Back Side of the Desert* degree. It's the same place David got his MBSD degree too (1 Sam. 17:34-37; Ps. 23).

Moses' problem, we could say, was that he looked left and right, but he didn't look up! “It entered [Moses'] mind to visit his brethren.” God didn't tell him to do this. It was his idea. I think with so much power and influence and education, it made him a little rash, impetuous and headstrong. He's used to being the one in control. F. B. Meyer said Moses was, *“full of his own ways.”*³ So by leaning on his own understanding (Prov. 3:5-6) and not being in touch with the Lord, he tried to **force the will of God before its time** and it led to a personal disaster and a very vulnerable time in his life. That's why he had to **hide** what he did and then had to hide out in the wilderness.

But honestly, how many of us can say, *“Been there. Done that.”*? You tried to do **God's work, the world's way** and it didn't work out or you **got ahead of God** on something. Maybe you are really gifted and talented and suited for a special task and you know it. Great! But if you're not careful, you can force your way into a place where God wants you prematurely. The anxious waiting tempts you to force God's will prematurely. You try to speed things up and help God open the doors for you. You know, we can be so driven by a sense of purpose that we inadvertently take matters into our own hands and our prayers make God out to be more of a sidekick, rather than our Lord and we get ahead of Him. As one man said, “He did not bother to seek God's way and God's timing. Instead, Moses began to carry out that plan according to *Moses' way and Moses' schedule*. As he did, sadly, many things began to unravel for him.”⁴

II. **MOSES' FLIGHT TO MIDIAN. (VV. 15-25)**

15 When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. 18 When they came to Reuel their father, he said, “Why have you

come back so soon today?” 19 So they said, “An Egyptian [no doubt Moses still looked like an Egyptian with Egyptian garb] delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock.” 20 He said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat.” 21 Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. 22 Then she gave birth to a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

So, confused, Moses flees as a fugitive into the dry, desert wilderness of **Midian**, which is a good picture of his soul at this point. On a map, Midian probably refers to the northeastern shores of the gulf of Aqaba (Ptolemy and Josephus). Midianites were **descendants of Abraham** and his later wife, Keturah. This means there’s a good chance that they knew about or served the God of Abraham. The priest of Midian, **Reuel** (also called Jethro), a Kenite, means “friend of God” and it appears that he really was. The Kenites show kindness to Israel during the Exodus and were always on friendly terms (Judges 1:16; 1 Sam. 15:6).

But Moses **sits down by a well** and before long, Reuel’s **daughters** (7 of them) come to **water their father’s flock**. So they fill up the troughs for their sheep but some other shepherds come and try to push them around and take their water. Moses couldn’t resist... he hates injustice. Being a deliverer is weaved into the fabric of his soul and he drives them away. Now I think this is an important event in his life. Even though Moses has failed as a deliverer in Egypt, **God still allows him to be a righteous deliverer on a smaller scale** in Midian almost immediately. It’s a sign God’s not done with him. He also displays a little **shepherd-hearted, servant leadership** by watering their flocks. So right there, already, we have hope for Moses. He’s not a total washout. His education in real spiritual leadership is just beginning.

Upon returning to their father, the daughters tell him what happened, and he asks – I find somewhat humorously – “*Well, where is he?!*” You invite a man like that over for a meal, right? Especially if you are one of these daughters living in Midian, you catch a man like that! And one of them does in an arranged marriage. Moses ends up marrying **Zipporah** and they have a child named **Gershom** which basically means “cast out sojourner.” This name tells you a bit about how Moses feels at this point in his life. He feels like a nobody. An outcast. Disillusioned. Without a home. He’s probably thinking, “*God’s done with me. I’m finished.*” But we know the rest of the story, don’t we? God’s not done with Moses. Moses is right where God needs him to be.

If you’re in the desert today, I want to give you a few principles to remember and apply:

1. **Rest in God’s sovereignty.**

According to the final verses of this chapter, Israel is still in bondage. They are still crying out to the Lord (vv. 23-25). But God knows. He hears their cries. He hasn’t forgotten His covenant. But the timing isn’t quite right for their deliverance (Gen. 15:16) and here in the desert, Moses is going learn to rely on God to provide and to take care of His own people. That God doesn’t *need* him and that God’s sovereign timing is as important to his call, if not more important, than action (Gal. 4:4). In Midian, Moses

learns to put *God's people* in *God's hands* and make God the hero, not himself. Moses is learning Psalm 46:10, "*Cease striving and know that I am God.*" God's got this.

2. **Rely on God's grace.**

Forgetting to rely on God's grace is a good way to end up in the desert. Moses is learning that apart from God, he can do nothing (John 15:5). It's not even that without God we can't do *very much*. It's that we can do *nothing* for the Lord without Him. It doesn't matter how much money, training, charisma or notoriety you have, unless God's grace is driving it, you got nothin' (Zech. 4:6). You have to be brought to an end of yourself in order to be a useful vessel for the Lord and that's a crushing experience sometimes. But as long as we are self-sufficient and self-reliant, the power of God is ineffectual in our lives.

3. **The way out is down.**

That doesn't mean get a shovel and dig. It means **humility** is required to get out of the desert and to keep growing. If you don't genuinely confess and forsake your sins that led you into the wilderness, you'll become angry and bitter there. God expects us to learn humility there. From a leadership perspective, Moses is going need this more than anything. Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to be first [in the kingdom of God] must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.*" If Moses is going to be a leader, or if you and I are going to be leaders and especially leaders of God's people, the number one trait you need is **meekness** – power under control – which flows out of humility. This is the chief virtue that will define Moses' life according to **Numbers 12:3**.⁵

4. **Failure provides a fresh start.**

Sometimes because we have an over-estimated view of ourselves, we let ourselves be destroyed by personal failures. We can let our emotions or Satan's fiery darts tell us that we're total washouts and useless for God from here on out. It causes us to crawl into a deep, dark hole and never climb out. Or, embarrassed, we bench ourselves permanently and hide until people forget who we are. But remember, God is just getting started with Moses. God's call to his greatest task won't come until he's 80 years old. Sometimes you just have to eat humble pie. Everyone does.

Psalm 103 says that **God remembers you're made of dust** – you're not perfect. You're a fickle, sinful human. It's no surprise to Him. Psalm 103 also says, "*He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.*" When you're in the desert, remind yourself of God's unconditional loving kindness and promises in Christ. There is no condemnation in Him (Rom. 8:1). Remember, Moses and David were guilty of murder but according to God's Word, He remembers their faith and not their failures. They're known for being men after God's own heart and men of faith. He doesn't define us by our failures, but by our faith.

5. Serve in obscurity.

Even though Moses had just failed miserably, was loathing himself, and probably had given up on all dreams of delivering Israel, there was still deep within him a desire to be a deliverer. Still within him the sense that this was what he was made for. He couldn't help but save Reuel's daughters from wicked shepherds. So God let him deliver in small, obscure ways before he was ready for the great Exodus. When you're in the wilderness, settle down and drink from the well that is Christ. Get in the Word, in prayer and take some baby steps to serve God in obscure ways. Just enjoy walking with God each day and wait on His timing. Don't sideline yourself completely. You know Peter wanted to do that after his failure, but Jesus told him until it hurt, "feed My sheep" (John 21:15-19).

6. God wastes nothing.

Even though everything about Moses' life up to this point seems like a disaster, we must keep in mind that God is shaping this man for something through the crushing circumstances. He's wasting nothing. In this wilderness, Moses will be learning to walk with God – to be a good **shepherd** who leads sheep and doesn't drive them. He's going to learn the **in and outs of the wilderness life** where Israel will one day come to **freely worship** God with him in this place. I also speculate that he's even going to learn about being a **priest** of the God of Abraham from his father-in-law. **God knows exactly what He's doing with Moses.** One of the ways we know this is from **Stephen's speech** in Acts 7. He likens Moses' life to a **type of Christ.**

1. **Chosen as a divine deliverer**, ruler or judge. Both are powerful in word and deed.
2. **Rejected** by Israel at his first coming to them.
3. He goes away from Israel and **marries a Gentile bride** as Jesus with the mostly Gentile church. (Rom. 9:6-9)
4. He **returns again** a second time to deliver Israel. (Rom. 11:26-27)

So even in this failure, God is painting a powerful picture of Christ. And He is able to weave our failures into a beautiful story as well, making us more like Christ.

As I mentioned in the introduction, sometimes the best education we will ever receive is an education through failure. Many times our problem isn't that we've failed, it's that we haven't failed enough. The PhD's are great. The Master's degrees, the undergrads are fine. You do need knowledge, just as Moses did (2 Pet. 1:6). That education will be useful too. But so much spiritual wisdom, teachability, and sensibility can only come through the desert. And to be honest, it's the people who have experienced failure – and are in the desert right now (figuratively speaking) – who are on the cusp of a real spiritual breakthrough and are being built into a more useful vessel for the Lord. That's a person God is shaping to do great things with.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Life of Moses: God's First Deliverer of Israel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 42.

² F. B. Meyer, *Moses, Servant of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1909. 2014), 33.

³ Meyer, 31.

⁴ Charles R. Swindoll, *Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 40.

⁵ Jerry Wragg, *Courageous Churchmen: Leaders Compelling Enough to Follow* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2018), 34.