

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 6. Moses – a basket case.

We come to the book of Exodus, whose events probably took place around 1400 B.C. Here we will learn more about God, His attributes of justice, truthfulness, mercy, faithfulness and holiness, His redemption, His law and how He is to be worshipped. Though Lord of history, His presence is with His people. His covenant with His chosen Abraham is continued with His chosen Moses. By now the drought was over and the family of Jacob could have returned to Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham. As time passed the growing community came into some position of power as their allotted land of Goshen was located on the northeast border of Egypt and they were in a good place if they ever saw fit to side with an invading army and shake off their association with Egypt. But fertile Goshen was ideal grazing for the flourishing Israeli flocks, and no doubt their masters enjoyed the benefits of Egypt with its creature comforts and sophistication. We don't know how much of the worship of God was maintained among the rising generations, but they obviously found it too hard to contemplate returning to the way of life God had chosen for them.

Then about 1580 B.C. the Egyptians revolted against their alien rulers, the Semitic Hyksos who had shown favour to Jacob's family. Exodus 1:8 says simply that a new king, "who did not know about Joseph", came to power in Egypt, and the nation resolved that never again would they submit to foreign domination. The Israelites were multiplying at an alarming rate, enough to become a threat to national security. The new Pharaoh, a native Egyptian and ruler over a large empire, decided to move the capital north to the delta region. About this time the store cities of Pithom and Rameses were planned and this would require enormous numbers of slave labourers, so every foreign captive, prisoner and alien living in Egypt was rounded up and forced to work at hard labour for Pharaoh. (Exodus 1:11). This of course included the Israelites.

Egypt throughout the Bible is used as a symbol of life without God. Should the Israelites have peacefully returned to their promised home and avoided the years of slavery they had to endure? Was there no leader to motivate them into returning to living under the direction of God? Was it God's plan or their slackness that forced them to degenerate into slaves? In any case, their torment is reflected today in those who refuse to follow the way God has shown them: they too sink into the slavery of their own making.

The Egyptians still dreaded the Israelites who stubbornly continued to multiply; their reward was to be worked ruthlessly in hard labour in brick and mortar, and with all kinds of work in the fields. On top of that Pharaoh issued an order for the Israelite baby boys to be killed, and when the midwives refused to obey his murderous command he co-opted the whole people of the land to help in the grizzly work. Verses 15-22 set this out.

Into this scene Moses was born – Chapter 2. There was something special about Moses that compelled his mother Jochebed above and beyond her natural maternal love, to protect him from the murderous Egyptian law. But a healthy baby is hard to hide! With great commonsense she wove the little papyrus basket, covering it with bitumen to make it waterproof, and launched her son onto a backwater of the River Nile where he would be hidden among the reeds, thus literally obeying Pharaoh's decree to throw all baby boys into the river. Big sister Miriam was posted nearby to await developments. Maybe Jochebed was hoping some wealthy Egyptian would find him and rear him to use as a servant; some Semitic slaves worked as house servants and butlers and were valued by the Egyptians.

In timing so perfect that it must have been organised by God, Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe, right at the moment when little Moses began to cry - a cry that reached her heart. It has been speculated that she was the redoubtable Hatshepsut, one of the most powerful and remarkable women of all Egyptian history. The way she blatantly disregarded Pharaoh's decree and took matters

into her own hands, would fit the dominating character of this woman who, through the reign of 3 Pharaohs, was a mighty power in Egypt.

It is interesting to note that the 3 people who rescued Moses from death were all women – a God-fearing mother who could not bear to see her son die, her daughter just a girl in the right place at the right time, and the third a pagan princess indulging a whim. God is not limited in who or what He will use for His purposes. He even uses us! And God has a sense of humour; I am sure all mothers will agree with Jochebed it was a marvellous idea to be paid well for breastfeeding her own child!

Thanks to the quick-witted courage of Miriam, Jochebed was allowed to rear her special son until he was weaned at about 3 years of age. I suspect that during that time the God-fearing mother was at pains to instil into Moses whatever knowledge she had of God, because Moses never lost the awareness of the one true God. Then Jochebed had to cope with the wrench of handing him over and the little 3-year-old's life changed radically as he moved to the palace and was brought up as a son of the ruling Pharaoh. In Acts 7:22 Stephen tells us Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and this training was ideal preparation for his later grand calling. He must have learnt the codes of law and ritual of the Hittites and of Egypt, a good grounding for when he became the legislator through whom the laws of the Israelite theocracy were given, and the standards of morality established. He would have been trained in the use of weapons and chariotry – Josephus says he commanded an army – and of course writing, making him well fitted to the task of recording God's law.

But we come to verse 11 and see that all the luxuries of the palace had not taken away from Moses his sense of God's call to Israel as a nation. He had not received such a call to himself personally, but was eager to do what he could to help his people. When he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, "one of his own people," he could not stand it; forbearing gave way to anger and he promptly killed the Egyptian. But murder was not the way God had chosen to save His people. Next day Moses' rashness came home to roost as he faced the fact that his crime had become known and, worse still, his efforts to help his fellow-countrymen were not appreciated by them.

Verse 15 tells us that Pharaoh, who no doubt resented the prominence this foreigner had attained through his wilful daughter, was angry enough to seek Moses' life. Such a crime committed by a government official against a slave would normally have been overlooked, but maybe Pharaoh was waiting for such a chance to get rid of Moses without causing a full-scale uprising among the slaves. At the age of forty, leaving behind the wealth, position and privileges of his position, and maybe causing his foster-mother's anger at such gross ingratitude, Moses had to flee.

Would this be the end of Moses' stellar career? After his futile attempt to become the redeemer of his own people, he must have endured an overwhelming sense of failure and the bitter sting of ingratitude. But in God's agenda failure is not final. God had a lot to teach Moses yet, lessons he could only learn in the quiet desert away from the bustle of Egypt. He still had to come face to face with God and receive His call for himself. Don't despair when you feel God dealing sternly with you: be glad that He is treating you as an individual!

From verse 16 on we trace the sojourn of Moses in Midian. Among the mountains in the south of the Sinai peninsula many foreigners could be found, all seeking copper and turquoise in the red sandstone rocks amid a rugged, inhospitable desert area. Here it would be easy for a lone fugitive to lose his Egyptian identity among the various groups of Asiatic slaves working mines for the Egyptians. For a man who probably had never been outside the lush delta region of Egypt, this must have been a terrible journey through stark and forbidding country.

In his journey Moses came to a well and sat down to rest. Verse 16 talks of a "priest of Midian". Midian was a son of Abraham and there may have been some knowledge of God among the Midianites. In any case, this priest Reuel (also known as Jethro) was to serve for Moses as a place of retreat, safety

and healing of spirit. When Reuel's 7 daughters came to the well to water their flock and some shepherds roughly tried to drive them away, Moses' sense of justice would not permit him to see the girls mistreated. Despatching them single-handed, Moses watered the flock himself and gave the girls an early mark. When Reuel found out why they came home so soon he was scandalized at their ingratitude towards the "Egyptian." "Why didn't you bring him with you?" he chided them. "Go and invite him home for dinner!" The girls complied, and Reuel's reward to Moses was to give him his eldest daughter, Zipporah, for a wife. It was unusual that Moses was still single: had God kept him from marrying in Egypt to prevent him from fathering a high-ranking Egyptian family?

And so began this second stage of preparation for Moses. In service to Reuel as a shepherd, he had plenty of time to think: Reuel taught him how to care for the flocks and sent him on journeys to find pastureland. He soon learned to survive and find water and food in unlikely places – valuable knowledge that would save his life, and his people's lives, more than once in future years. And he was acquiring an intimate knowledge of the very terrain through which he would be leading the "flock" of Israel! In fact, this mundane training would be as invaluable as the divine guidance of the cloud. In leading that flock his training as a shepherd would instil in him the patience and forbearance that he would need in order to handle the wayward Israelites! So God was crafting not only Moses' mind, but also his emotions and his spirit. It may be it was here that he wrote Psalm 90, and perhaps 91.

From palace pomp to pasturing sheep – was this God's idea of success? It would be hard for Moses to see through his sense of failure, as God worked gently over the next 40 years, to prepare him for a job of supreme significance. Moses still stands out as the foremost man of the pre-Christian world, who took a race of slaves and, under extremely trying circumstances, moulded them into a powerful nation which has altered the whole course of history. (And by the way, Moses was another great descendant of the unloved Leah!) Whatever your work for God, it is special to Him: be patient with His training of you - He knows how much you need!

Meanwhile, (verse 23) back in Egypt sometime during that 40 years the reigning Pharaoh died, but nothing changed for the Israelites. They groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry went straight up to God. A hopeful note enters the story in 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." The stage was set for the next great act in the drama.

Chapter 3 sets the scene for the great transformation. It was an ordinary day, just like all the other ordinary days, with Moses leading the flock to pasture. On this day he had gone as far as Horeb, described as "the mountain of God" and most likely identical with Mount Sinai which would figure significantly in the young nation's foundation. Moses had settled into this pastoral life but, whatever his thoughts about the God of his fathers, he had never come face-to-face with the Deity Himself. Now was the time for such an encounter.

Off to the side of his path, Moses could see a bush on fire. Danger! It must be put out! But then as he continued to look, he could hardly believe his eyes: the flames were leaping high inside the bush, *but the bush was not burning up!* Curiosity drove him over for further inspection, and then came another shock as he heard a voice calling him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" It was an earth-shattering moment. Could this be the God he had heard about? Meekly he answered, "Here I am."

The voice came again, with a warning to take off his sandals, for like a slave he must go barefoot on what was now holy ground. And it was God's voice. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Now Moses was afraid and hid his face. This God was too great for him, a mere man: he dared not even look. But God went on, in verse 7. "I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..... And now

the cry of the Israelites has reached Me and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.....” Oh, how great! thought Moses, we haven’t been forgotten after all. God has spoken – yes, it must be God who is speakingHe is going to rescue my people at last! But God had not finished. He went on to say to Moses, in verse 10, *“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt.”*

Moses did a double take. In a state of shock he spoke back to God. “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” This was a different Moses from the prince who thought he could use his authority to serve his own purposes; 40 years in the desert had taught him meekness, a state in which God could use him. God now gave him the wonderful reply, “I will be with you, and to prove My words, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship Me on this very mountain.”

But Moses had recovered a little and he tried to argue with God. “Suppose the Israelites won’t believe You have told me to do this. They don’t even know Your Name.” Verse 14 stands alone as God’s answer came like a thunderbolt. “I AM WHO I AM”. To translate the Hebrew precisely - “I always have been and I always will be.” It was a name that expressed God’s nature as faithful, dependable, powerful and inviting mankind to give Him their full trust. It was the name, too, that Jesus used for himself in John 8:58, and the Jews knew quite well that he was claiming to be God. And if you’d like another reference to the New Testament, one could discern a prototype tucked away in Exodus 3:16, of the beloved verse, John 3:16 - God watched His children, saw their need and came down to rescue them and bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey! Calvary was not Plan B!

God now entwined the divine with the practical as He continued to give Moses a list of instructions and encouragement, in verses 16-22. The Israelites would not leave Egypt empty-handed.

Read verses 7-10 again to see how involved was God in the lives of His chosen people. He saw heard was concerned was coming down to rescue them ... and bring them out WAS GOING TO USE MOSES! When God gives you a job to do, however inadequate you may feel, remember that He is INVOLVED in the situation and knows that, in His strength, you can do what He asks of you!

Yet in chapter 4 Moses still hesitates, and God graciously gives him the sign of the staff becoming a snake and the temporary affliction of leprosy to impress on Moses that He is above and beyond man’s natural weakness. But still Moses demurred, in verses 10 and 13, with the excuse of his lack of eloquence; it was only after this encounter with God that he became, as Stephen says in Acts 7:22, “powerful in speech and action!” God’s anger was stirred at his reluctance; at this initial meeting with a personal God Moses had not yet learned to trust Him.

In His grace God referred Moses to his brother Aaron, whom He would give Moses as a helper and companion in the task. This most probably came as a surprise to Moses; we can surmise that their relationship had suffered as their lives had each taken a vastly different turn. But God told Moses in verse 14, “He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you.”

Moses had no argument left; he had been challenged to put his heart right with God, and now the relationship with his brother, just 3 years his senior, was to be restored. With full submission came full trust. Moses was willing at last to embark on the magnificent journey which would change him and change the course of history.