

“The Positive Power of Failure—in God’s Hands”

Exodus 2:11-22

September 29, 2024

We left off our study of Exodus a couple weeks ago in chapter two with the birth of Moses. Because of Pharaoh’s edict to kill the Hebrew baby boys in Egypt, Moses’ parents had hidden him for 3 months only to be discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter who took pity on him and adopted him as her own. This meant that Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s palace and as Acts 7:22 records, He “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in words and deeds”—and educated and skilled man.

Now we all know Moses as the great man used of God to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. So, we might expect that God would use Moses’ education and adopted standing in the palace to prepare him for just that. In many ways that is true. God was blessing Moses with various skills that would be invaluable to His eventual leadership. Yet God’s ways are so much different than man’s ways and before Moses would become a great man of God; before he would become a leader in God’s hands to deliver His people, Moses would need to suffer some hardship that would humble him and help him become the kind of man God could use for His glory.

As we unpack 2:11-22, we are going to discover a now 40-year-old man¹ who has a great heart for justice yet a short-sighted way of getting it done. As a result, chapter 2 records a major failure in Moses’ life—a failure that would bear 40 years of consequences for Moses but nevertheless become an instrument in God’s hand to shape Moses into the man God wants to use.

We are going to see some really practical encouragement in today’s passage. ***God may use our failures as a tool of blessing in our lives to free us from our spiritual independence (doing things our own way) when we humble ourselves and allow God to have His proper place of glory in our lives.***

Let’s pick up the story in [vss. 11-12]. We know from chapter 1 that the Hebrews were being ruthlessly driven in hard labor as slaves to build

fortified cities for Pharaoh. Then one day Moses decided to go out to see for himself the condition of his people, indicating that Moses still identifies with the Hebrews as his people. To his horror, he observed an Egyptian beating his Hebrew slave, presumably for not meeting the slave master’s expectations. So Moses did something impulsively yet premeditated in the moment. He looks around to make sure no one is watching, and then he strikes down the Egyptian—he kills the Egyptian slave master and buries him in the sand.

It may or may not surprise you that some scholars actually argue over whether or not it was wrong for Moses to kill this man. Some say that Moses was acting as God’s instrument of judgment to bring about justice in this situation, like the later judges in the book of Judges. The law had not yet been given, but wasn’t Moses carrying out the law of retribution—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? This reasoning is problematic, however, since Moses didn’t restrain himself to just take an eye for eye or just give a beating for a beating. Even if that law had been on the books, Moses went too far. Moses took matters into his own hands. God had not yet appointed Moses to deliver His people (ch 3). Moses is a self-appointed judge, jury and executioner—a self-appointed justice warrior.

Yet let’s not underestimate how complicated the situation would have been in Moses’ mind. There doesn’t seem to be any recourse for these Hebrew slaves. There was no bill of rights for slaves in Egypt. There was no law to appeal to in Egypt for the oppressed. Perhaps it seemed this was the only way Moses could exact justice and yet it was not God’s way in God’s time.

Vs. 13 tells us that when Moses went out again the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting. This is not surprising since these men were subjected to brutality every day. Their lives were bitter with violence which would naturally make tempers flare more easily, even among their brothers. Again, Moses decided to intervene saying, “why do you strike your companion?”
[vs. 14]

¹ Acts 7:23

Moses has good reason to be afraid. Not only is he guilty of killing another man, but he is a Hebrew who killed an Egyptian. And now the word is out. If Moses thought the Hebrews would appreciate his justice crusade, he was wrong. This only fueled the problem for the Hebrews. Who would be blamed for the death of this slave master? Certainly, the slaves and probably the very one that Moses sought to deliver would get blamed. No wonder he talked! He was seeking to save his own skin.

Actually, the man's answer to Moses was a good question, even though it was said spitefully: "who made you prince and judge over us?" Isn't this the heart of the matter? It was Moses, not God, who had appointed himself to take justice into his own hands.

In vs. 15, Moses' fears are realized: **[vs. 15]** Can you imagine? Pharaoh was probably not happy about having this Hebrew grow up in his palace and eat at this table in the first place—he probably only tolerated it for the sake of his daughter. And now his Hebrew has retaliated by murdering an Egyptian. Pharaoh must have been furious—indeed, furious enough to put a bounty on Moses' head.

So, in two days, Moses has gone from being a prince of Egypt, to a self-appointed justice warrior, to a fugitive on the run for fear of his life. So Moses takes shelter in the land of Midian. The Midianites had a similar culture to the Hebrews since they were half-brothers to Israel. The Midianites were also descendants of Abraham but not through Sarah, and not through Isaac so they were not the children of promise. After Sarah died, Abraham married another wife by the name of Keturah and had a son through her by the name of Midian (Gen 25:1-6). By the way, you'll recall that it was the Midianites that carried Joseph down to Egypt after being sold by his brothers into slavery (Gen 37:28).

As he wanders through the land of Midian Moses finds a well, so he sits down there. This is the place to meet people. And that is precisely what is about to happen. **[vs. 16-17]** This is now Moses' 3rd attempt to stand for justice. These 7 girls have just drawn all the water necessary for their flock when some bully shepherds come and drive them away so that they can take advantage of the water already drawn by the girls. But Moses won't put

up with it. He takes a stand against these bully shepherds and drives them away. Notice here that Moses may have grown up in the palace, but he's no weak, soft, palace darling. He is strong, courageous, and intimidating enough to drive away several men. And then Moses serves these young women by watering their flock.

Notice the difference we see in Moses this time. The first time he stood for justice, he killed a man with *no self-restraint*. The second time he stood for justice and discovered that his murder had become known, he *ran for fear* of his life. This time he stood for justice with *courage and self-restraint* that resulted in actually serving the vulnerable young women he took a stand for. The women returned home elated... **[vs. 18-22]**.

Here we learn some interesting details about Moses' life, like how he got married and had children and his favorable relationship to his father-in-law who we will later come to know by another name, Jethro. But I want to draw your attention to two specific details. First, the women identified Moses as an *Egyptian* (19). Moses has just come from Egypt where he was steeped in Egyptian culture and most likely still wearing Egyptian clothing. He appears to be an Egyptian, even though we know from vs. 11 that he was seeking to be identified with his Hebrew people. In fact, Hebrews 11 says even more strongly: "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin."

But now, Moses is displaced from both the Hebrews and the Egyptians. In other words, who is he? What is his true identity? He's an ethnic Jew but he's trained in the ways of Egypt's high society. It's a little bit like a missionary kid who spends his entire life in another country and then returns to the States as an 18-year-old to go to college. It's a really strange experience. He is an American but how American is he? Culturally he is African or Asian, but his family roots are American.

It's no wonder then that Moses named his first son, Gershom—this is the second detail to take note of. Gershom literally means "an alien there," or as Moses said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" (22). Do you hear an ache in Moses' soul? He has become a man in exile. And according to Acts

7:30, Moses would spend 40 years in this foreign place doing the hard and humble work of being a shepherd.

What is the purpose of this season of Moses' life? We know what *Moses* did to get himself in this situation, but what is *God* doing during these 40 years while Moses bears the consequences of living in exile for killing a man? God is preparing to make Moses into the kind of leader God can use. And *the first step to becoming a man God can use is developing humility*. Moses has gone from living in the most privileged status in Egypt for 40 years to doing the most humble work of his day for 40 years—being a shepherd. Just think of this. God is preparing Moses far in advance of his calling which will come in chapter 3. His Egyptian education as a young man included not only reading, writing, and math in multiple languages, including Hebrew and Egyptian, but probably also leadership, administration, and military training. Do you think that will be helpful?

Moses would know how to conduct himself in Pharaoh's court, he would be known by those in leadership, but now God was also preparing him to be able to identify with his Hebrew people who were living as foreigners in Egypt. He would become accustomed to humble and hard work.

As a shepherd in Midian, Moses would learn how to navigate the wilderness as a nomad—crucial skills for leading the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years. And as a shepherd, God is preparing Moses to shepherd people. Furthermore, Moses is learning to lead a family during these years.

In a very real sense, this passage is about Moses' failure and the long-term consequences of that failure. But how might God be working to turn Moses' failure into something for Moses' good and God's glory? I've already mentioned that God is humbling Moses and providing a variety of experiences to develop Moses' skills. But there is something even more fundamental that I want to draw your attention to. *God has to get the "hero-status" out of Moses' heart so that He can be a true spiritual leader who is fixated not on his own agenda but on God's glory*. God would use Moses'

heart for justice—yes—but Moses had to learn that he could not simply take matters into his own hands as self-appointed justice warrior. He needed to be a man submitted to God—ready and willing to walk in God's ways and in God's timing alone. In other words, Moses had to learn to get out of the way if God would get the glory.

Perhaps this will make more sense if we can look at chapter 2 in hindsight against the greater backdrop of God's purpose in the Exodus. What is God's purpose? Our first answer is to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt according to His promise to establish a people for Himself to be a blessing to the nations. Yet there is something even more significant than that. ***God's ultimate purpose is to display His glory to the world!*** And if God is going to use Moses to do that, then Moses is going to have to get over himself. The core message and purpose of the book of Exodus is this: ***"That the world may know the glory of Yahweh."*** That is so much bigger than Moses—he needs to get out of the way! And God will use his failure as training ground to humbly lead the world to see that Yahweh is God, and there is no other. Like John the Baptist who said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

So let's get ahead of ourselves here for a moment. Let me show you God's purpose in his own words—14 times.²

1. Why does God call Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt in the first place? Exodus 6:7 – "I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God, and ***you shall know that I am the Lord your God***, who has brought you out of from under the burdens of the Egyptians."
2. Why does God harden Pharaoh's heart to oppose God's commands? Exodus 7:3-5 – "I will harden Pharaoh's heart...***and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord*** when I stretch out My hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."
3. In the plague of the frogs, why does Moses tell Pharaoh to appoint a time for the frogs to be removed? Exodus 8:10 – "It will be done as

² The following questions and points gleaned from Mark Dever (*The Message of the Old Testament*, pgs. 99-103).

you say, ***so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God.***

4. Why does God tell Pharaoh that He is pressing against Him so hard in the plague of hail? Exodus 9:14 – “this time I will send the full force of My plagues against you...***so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth.***”
5. Why did God raise Pharaoh up to be king in this place and time? Exodus 9:16 – “I have raised you up for this very purpose, ***that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.***”
6. Why does Moses appoint a specific time for the hail to stop? Exodus 9:29 – “The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, ***so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's.***”
7. Why does God continue to harden Pharaoh’s heart and send more plagues? Exodus 10:1-2 – “I have hardened his heart...so that I may perform these miraculous signs of Mine among them ***that you may tell your children and grandchildren*** how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, ***and that you may know that I am the Lord.***”
8. Why does Pharaoh keep stubbornly refusing to listen to the Lord? Exodus 11:9 - “Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you ***so that My wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.***”
9. After Pharaoh released the Israelites, why did he change his mind and pursue them? Exodus 14:4 – “And I will harden pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But ***I will gain glory for Myself*** through pharaoh and all his army, and ***the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.***”
10. Why does God drown Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea? Exodus 14:17 – “I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And ***I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army....The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through pharaoh...***”
11. What was the Israelites’ response to seeing Pharaoh’s army overthrown? Exodus 14:31 – “When the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, ***the people feared the Lord and put their trust in Him*** and in Moses His servant.”

12. Moses’ song of praise expresses the glory and reputation God deserves. Exodus 15:11 – “***Who among the gods is like You, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?***”
13. What will be the result of God’s glory and fame among the nations? Exodus 15:14-16 – “***The nations will hear and tremble; anguish*** will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be ***terrified***, the leaders of Moab will be seized with ***trembling***, the people of Canaan will ***melt away; Terror and dread will fall upon them.***”
14. When Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all the great things that God had done, he praised the Lord and said, “***Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods***” (Exodus 18:8-11).

Now, do you see clearly the purpose of the exodus? God is working in such a remarkable way so that Moses, the Israelites, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the nations, and the coming generations will know that Yahweh is the Lord—***that the world may know the glory of Yahweh!***

With that grand and glorious purpose of Exodus to display God’s glory, can you see how the man to lead God’s people cannot be a self-willed, independent man who is bent on doing things his own way? ***If God's glory is going to be on display, Moses has to get out of the way.*** And God in His grace will work, even through the consequences of Moses’ failure and sin, to humble him and begin preparing him to be a man of God rather than a self-made man.

Now all of a sudden, the events of chapter 2 are not merely interesting facts, they are *essential*. I’m not saying we need to sin grievously to be used of God. But sometimes a man has to fail to see his need to do things God’s way. *What’s essential is humility*. Whether we humble ourselves or whether God disciplines us with humiliation, the road of humility is the only one that glorifies God.

Here's what I hope you walk away with today: ***Because our life purpose is to glorify God, we cannot afford to seize control and seek to do things our own way, but rather must humbly submit ourselves to God's will for our lives.*** And praise God that when we humble ourselves, ***God can turn our***

failures into a tool of blessing by freeing us from our spiritual independence to give God His proper place of glory in our lives.

John Wesley's prayer captures the attitude of a heart that is poised to glorify God: ***"I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low for You; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholehearted yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal"*** (John Wesley)³

As we prepare for the Lord's table today, we have what Moses didn't have in his day—a clear understanding of the specific way that God has provided to deal with our failure of sin. God provided His one and only Son as a perfect sinless sacrifice in payment for our sin, so that God's holy justice would be satisfied, and we could be forgiven.

As we prepare for the Lord's table we have two incredible opportunities before us. First, as you humble yourself and confess your sin to Jesus, He takes away the guilt, shame, and condemnation of your sin and replaces it with *grace*! So that your heart becomes a deep well of grace that overflows with gratitude. From guilt to gratitude, bondage to freedom, shame to joy, from condemnation to favor—that's how God turns your failure into blessing. He forgives you and gives Himself to you anew.

The second incredible opportunity before us is to extend the very forgiveness that God has given us, to others whose sins and failures have wounded us. What a tremendous gift to be set free from bitterness and stubborn hurt. *Do you believe that the cross-work of Jesus is sufficient for the person who sinned against you?* Do you believe it is sufficient for your sin of unforgiveness? Jesus said, "If you forgive men their transgression, your Heavenly Father will forgive you." That's because His grace is more than sufficient for both your brother's sin and for your sin of bitterness. This is how God turns the failures of others into blessing—bitterness to

forgiveness, bondage to freedom, resentment to grace! Let's come to Jesus together to forgive and be forgiven. There's grace enough.

"Lord God, there is no other religion in the world outside a relationship with Jesus that can transform our failures into blessing because You are the only God who gives grace! We need that grace now..."

Communion:

- **Bread** – A woman once came to Jesus with an expensive vial of perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. Luke tells us that she washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Some condemned her for being extravagant and even wasteful. But Jesus said, "He who is forgiven much, loves much." (Luke 7) *God's forgiving grace turns our failure of sin into the gratitude of joy!*
- **Cup** – "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from *all* sin"—including the sin of bitterness we hold against others for their sin against us (1John 1:7). *The blood of Jesus turns our grudges into grace for us and grace for others.*

³ Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (Preaching the Word), pg. 66.