

## 2:1-10 God at work in surprising ways

### Introduction

The life of Moses presents a series of striking contrasts. He was the child of an enslaved couple and yet the adopted son of a royal princess. He was born in a hut and continued in his early years to spend some time there, but lived the majority of his childhood and then his early adult life in a palace. He experienced poverty in the home of his birth parents that contrasted with the opulent wealth of the royal family and the Egyptian social elite. He had the best private education that was available in the land –the equivalent of the Eton College of his day where he would have sat in classes with the sons of the most important families in the land, despite being recognized as a member of an ethnic minority that was despised and marginalized. In his early adulthood he spent time in the Egyptian army and there is information to suggest that he might have commanded an Egyptian force in combat against an Ethiopian army. He had access to a life of luxurious ease, yet would spend forty years living in a tent as part of a nomadic community in the desert. Does any of the experiences we have of life go to waste? I do not think so! When we reflect on the surprising work of God in this man's life it encourages us greatly as we turn to reflect on our own lives. The blessings we enjoy and the testing times we live through are used by God for our longer term good. Sometimes we have absolutely no idea why particular blessings or distinctive challenges become part of our experience yet in the bigger picture God is at work in each of His children's lives for our good. For Moses he was tempted with all the pleasures of sin available in Egypt. The potential for power abuse must have been high in his early adult life, yet we have no evidence reported that his conduct was other than exemplary – though as the evidence is so sparse until he began to identify with the suffering Israelites, it is important not to place too much weight upon it. He was a man who would claim to have difficulties in public speaking and yet was eloquent in prayer with God. He knew the rod of power in Egypt but also the simplicity of life with the staff of a shepherd caring for his sheep. He would know what it was like to be a fugitive on the run from the Egyptian military yet was chosen to be an ambassador for the God of Israel. A man who had laid down Egyptian law would later defy it in obedience to the call of God before becoming the recipient of the moral law of God –the Ten Commandments – during Israel's time in the wilderness. A man who spent most of his life surrounded by many other people would eventually die alone on Mount Nebo, but would later appear with Elijah alongside Jesus on Mount Hermon –the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36).

### 1. The home that God chose (Exodus 2:1-4)

(a) The religious context (Exodus 2:1) *Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman...*

In Joshua 24:14-15, two generations later, when the Israelites were now firmly established in The Promised Land, Joshua their aged leader included these remarks in his final public address: <sup>14</sup> *'Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. **Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the River Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.*** <sup>15</sup> *But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'* Sometimes social commentators and historians imagine former days in our land when almost everyone chose freely to worship in

church on a Sunday. It is a myth! At its highest recorded figure in the modern era when people could freely choose their religious or non-religious convictions, a maximum of 45% of people made that choice in 1851. There were many others for whom their belief in God had minimal impact on their daily lives or who held to other religious or non-religious opinions. Likewise we must not imagine that devotion to the God of Israel practiced in the Goshen region of northern Egypt was the daily experience of all the descendants of Jacob. There were some people who through the ease of their affluence felt no need for God in their lives. Equally others during the years of oppression and slavery may have come to the conclusion that God wasn't listening to their prayers for liberation; or He was powerless to act – or worse still -that the gods of Egypt were more powerful than Him! The home God chose as the centre of the extraordinary events of this story was one occupied by a couple of God-fearing people Amram and Jochebed. Both of them were of the tribe of Levi. In Numbers 3:12 God would declare: *I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine.* The dedication of faithful God-honouring members of this tribe through the terrible days of oppression in Egypt and temptations in the desert would be a cause of blessing by God in the future. According to Exodus 6:18, Amram was the son of Kohath, Levi's grandson. Jochebed (Exodus 6:20) was Amram's father's sister. This tribe was set apart at Molunt Sinai for the particular work of carrying the holy objects of the tabernacle (the place of worship the Israelites used when travelling in the desert). Moses would be descended from the Kohathite branch of the family that was entrusted with carrying on their shoulders holy things, especially the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred box that carried the Ten Commandments engraved on tables of stone (Numbers 7:9). This was the spiritual pedigree of the line of Levi at this particular time in history. It was clear that whatever happened in other homes in their street, God was central in their lives. They like many others must have been praying for deliverance from slavery and the restoration of the happy centuries of peaceful co-existence with the majority Egyptian population. They already had a girl called Miriam and a younger boy named Aaron and must have wondered what the future would hold for them. Enslavement was bad enough, but now a Pharaoh was ruling who wished to eliminate the Jewish people from the region. Their very existence on the land was a problem. Down through history there have been racist people with this viewpoint, including at the present time, as you will have seen on the TV news or in your daily newspapers.

What difference could this ordinary couple make by their devotion to the God of Israel? On the surface they were powerless. Yet God delights to use ordinary people to accomplish far more than they ever dare to ask for or even imagine in their prayers. Never allow the thought that what you can do doesn't make a difference – it can make a much bigger difference than you ever imagined. You may not have money to spare but someone may need you to listen to them in the midst of a personal crisis. Someone may need a helping hand in some small way –like our 'meals for mums' ministry- that we can carry out; too often Christians can be paralysed into inactivity because the problems they perceive around them are so great. God asks us to do what we can do for Him and for others – not what is impossible! For this couple as we will see it was continuing with a pregnancy and keeping the male child that God wanted them to do. A small act, but one of nation changing significance! You and I may have a calling to something behind the scenes like this couple as we serve the Lord, but without their faithful commitment to live for God what Moses did in the future would have been impossible. What might God want you or me to do this week for someone? Or what step of faith in Christian service might He want us to take that we previously thought was too great a step for us?

(b) **The social context** (Exodus 2:2-4) (i) **The choice to make** (Exodus 2:2) *and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.*

When Jochebed told Amram she was pregnant for a third time, instead of great joy there must have been real fear. The temptation to try and abort the tiny baby rather than risk a full-term child being thrown to the crocodiles or drowned in front of you might have been an issue for some Israelites. It does not appear to have been an issue for this couple. They recognized that God had enabled that precious young life to be conceived in Jochebed's womb. Therefore, as devout believers they wished to honour God by bringing that child into the world. The author of Hebrews in his list of great examples of faith from the past included this couple in his list. Hebrews 11:23 states: *By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.* The law of the land stated that Jewish boys should be killed. But God's law, a higher law, proclaimed the sacredness of life and prohibited murder. We have been privileged for some generations in this country to have governments that permitted freedom of religion, but if laws are passed that are contrary to our faith then we, like them, need to stop carefully and prayerfully to examine how the Lord would have us respond to unjust or unethical laws. Are you currently, or were you in the recent past, feeling pressured to obey a law or some rules at work that was inconsistent with the moral standards you uphold? When these situations arise we need to think carefully how to be wise in the response we give. Amram and Jochebed could have written a letter of protest to the Pharaoh and told him what they thought of his immoral law. However, it would have made no difference and possibly cost them all their lives. Instead, a silent act of civil disobedience was appropriate. We honour Rosa Park for her bus seat protest in Montgomery, Alabama, during the Civil Rights era in America when she sat in a seat reserved for white people and declined to move to those reserved for African Americans. However, while we honour those who took significant actions in the past, the challenge comes home to us: is there a course of action we ought to be taking today to challenge injustice in our land? The answer you give may be quite different to another person, but we ask the Lord to open our eyes when there is action that needs to be taken. However, opting out of society by not voting or not engaging with the politicians or other civic leaders in a democratic society is missing an opportunity to exert some influence for good. We can be sure that plenty of other people will be passing opinions to them to advocate for particular causes.

(ii) **The plan to save Moses** (Exodus 2:3-4) <sup>3</sup> *But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.* <sup>4</sup> *His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.*

Plan A only worked for so long. Moses grew and developed to the stage where hiding him inside the house no longer worked. An adult may stay quiet when ordered because soldiers are looking to find and kill them, but a baby cannot be controlled in that way! This couple who wanted to do the right thing also needed to be creative to ensure that the right outcome was achieved. The creativity challenge would be key to success at the human level. In the 1930s and early 1940s Dutch families seeking to hide Jewish people from the Nazis in their homes build false walls and erected hidden doors in attempts to evade detection. Thankfully many succeeded, but others paid a high cost when their guests were discovered and detained. In our opposition to wrong demands upon us and unjust laws we too may need to respond creatively in our opposition to that which is wrong.

So how did Amram and Jochebed evade detection for their young son each day? Well Pharaoh had said that baby boys should be placed in the river. However, he did not expect his order to be

followed in this way! They weaved together a basket of reeds and covered it with a form of pitch to seal it and ensure it was water tight. It must have been a good day when they produced the basket and tested it in the water and found that it floated safely in the river. Yet equally a nervous day when their precious child was first deposited among the reeds during the hours of daylight. We have no idea how many days had passed successfully before the unforgettable day when the baby was discovered. The word here translated *basket* **tebah** literally means *chest* or *coffin*. It is used elsewhere in the Old Testament only in the account of the flood in Noah's day in Genesis 7:1: *The Lord then said to Noah, 'Go into the ark (tebah), you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.* There are quite a few parallels in the two stories. The people who honoured God were in great danger. They were not familiar with travel on the water whether freshwater or at sea, but this was their only hope of survival. There was no knowledge of how long they would have to remain in the floating object that was their home, but it was the only way they had a chance of survival. Their lives were placed in God's hands. Interestingly both **tebah** were covered in pitch to ensure they floated in the water (Genesis 6:14 & Exodus 2:3). In both cases the means God used to save them required significant effort on the part of His people to ensure it took place. In the case of baby Moses Exodus 2:4 indicates that someone else played a part in watching out for her little brother. *His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.* When we face challenges today it is important to ask ourselves this question: what can I or what can we do to help resolve the situation we are facing? Sometimes the answer will be nothing, but on more occasions there will be something we can do that makes a difference. The role played by this brave girl was crucial in saving Moses' life. Without Miriam's intervention the successful outcome was most unlikely to have happened. However, for most of the time what she did faithfully was so boring and routine – simply watching and waiting as the hours went by. Praise God that she was faithfully at her post when her intervention was needed. She did what she could and it was enough to save Moses' life. No adult could have played that part under the circumstances of that day. Miriam was God's person in that moment. You and I will be God's person on a number of occasions as we stand for Him. Miriam only did what she could –no more was expected of her and no more required! It is exactly the same for you and me. Christians sometimes worry that God will ask them to do something they are not gifted or equipped to do. This story is most encouraging in demonstrating that the miraculous will of God may be brought about by ordinary people making themselves available to God and doing what they can do to honour Him.

## 2. The reward that God gave (Exodus 2:5-8)

(a) An unexpected helper (Exodus 2:5-6) <sup>5</sup> *Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river-bank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it.* <sup>6</sup> *She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. 'This is one of the Hebrew babies,' she said.* Have you ever been helped by a most unexpected source? I think it likely that many of us here can recall occasions when a total stranger offered to assist us by doing something we could never have expected. Years ago when I was travelling to Oxford to be interviewed for a possible place to train for Baptist pastoral ministry the car in which I was travelling skidded on something on the dual carriageway on which I was travelling, either oil or ice or a mixture of the two on that wintry day. Cutting a longer story short I had a head-on collision with a car coming in the opposite direction. Both vehicles were not in a state to travel on and I was thirty miles from my destination on a winter's evening. I was unfamiliar with the

location and had no idea how I would get to Oxford from that service station. Out of the blue a lady working in a shop came over to me and asked if I needed a lift. I explained my circumstances. She said that when she finished her shift in about an hour's time she would give me a lift to where I needed to go. This was incredibly generous considering she had the return trip to make that was at least another thirty miles from her home. She did not want to take any money for petrol despite my attempts to offer to reimburse her costs. I don't know her name or anything about her but she was on that occasion the person I needed to help me in an unexpected situation of need nearly three decades ago. Praise God for the people who bless us in our times of need in ways we could not expect. Is there someone who comes to mind for whom you want to thank God today? Have you been that special person for someone else in the recent past? In life God can allow us to be surprised by the people who rise to the occasion to undertake the special tasks that need to be undertaken. At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Israel, there is a garden dedicated to the 'Righteous Gentiles'; individuals who went out of their way risking and sometimes giving their lives to save Jewish people from the Nazis during the 1930s and 1940s. There are obvious Christian heroines like Jane Haining, the Church of Scotland Missionary who was a teacher in Budapest who would not be parted from the Jewish children in her class and who went to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp and died with them in 1944. Yet others were more complicated figures like Oscar Schindler who was a Nazi party member and industrialist. Yet he chose to save around 1200 Jews by employing them in his enamelware and armaments factories. At first this former spy for Nazi Germany thought only about financial profits from the businesses, but in 1944 and 1945 spent every penny he owned to save the lives of his workers in bribes to the Nazi officials who knew the ethnic origins of his workers. There is an example of an extraordinary person whom God used to help the Jewish people recorded in Isaiah 44:28-45:1,4: *who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"*... *'This is what the Lord says to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:.. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel My chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, though you do not acknowledge Me.* The lesson is clear God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes- even the ruler of a superpower can be the person whom God uses to accomplish his will.

Here it was an Egyptian princess whom God would use to save this precious little boy. If the later dating for the Exodus is correct, the Pharaoh in question was Rameses II, the brutal oppressor of ethnic minorities who sacrificed the lives of thousands of them to build his many monuments and cities. He had over one hundred children including sixty daughters. If this identification is correct - a big 'if' - then it is ironic that God used a daughter of the powerful tyrant to protect and rear the boy who would lead his nation to overthrow the chains of slavery. This action would be so unexpected that there was zero chance of Amram and Jochebed praying for this outcome for their son. God in His sovereignty opened the heart of this young woman to have compassion on this baby boy. It is a big encouragement for us in our prayers. Sometimes we come to God with a problem and have absolutely no idea how the problem could be resolved. Of course there are many occasions where there is no miraculous outcome, but praise God for the other times when something good but totally unexpected transforms a difficult situation. Do you need to be encouraged to keep on praying about a difficult problem just now? We cannot guarantee that the solution we desire will come about, but sometimes the Lord provides an

answer that is most encouraging but outside of the possible outcomes that we had entertained in our hopes and wishes or prayers.

(b) **An unexpected opportunity** (Exodus 2:7—10) <sup>7</sup> *Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter 'Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?'* <sup>8</sup> *'Yes, go,' she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother.* <sup>9</sup> *Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.'* *So the woman took the baby and nursed him.* <sup>10</sup> *When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, 'I drew him out of the water.'* The remarkable miracle that took place here followed the extraordinarily courageous intervention by this young girl. It was in parallel to the equally courageous decision of the princess to defy the edict of her father. In a brutal masculine world where even princesses were the 'possessions' of their father, this royal figure was also risking at best a severe beating and the confiscation of the child or at worst her own execution alongside the baby. However, her compassion and Miriam's courage combined to ensure this child was spared. Sadly there would have been plenty of Hebrew women whose babies had been killed who could have nursed the baby rescued from the water. However, in allowing Miriam to choose the best candidate it is very likely that the princess would guess that the birth mother would be the one chosen. The wonderful blessing of this encounter was that not only was the child's life secured and protected; in addition, the costs of child-rearing were covered. These parents had not been praying for the provision of child benefit –but God gave them more than they had sought from Him. All they had been asking for was the safety of the baby. Now Moses –the name chosen by the princess– was brought up in his own home where for the first few years of his life he would learn to speak Hebrew and know something of his culture and identity. In Hebrew the name 'Moses' comes from the verb 'mashah' that means to 'draw out'. It is, though also a common Egyptian word meaning 'son of'. Many Egyptian names employ it in conjunction with other words: Thutmosis (Son of Thut) and Ahmosis (son of Ah), for example (J. Currid, *Exodus*, Vol.1, p. 64). This child has an ironic name that transcends these two cultures. In Acts 7:21-22 Stephen said this of Moses' upbringing: *When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.* <sup>22</sup> *Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.* Moses would need all kinds of leadership skills in the future because very few fellow Israelites, as slaves, would have had any kind of formal education. In the providence of God Moses will have the best private education available in the country training him with royal princes to be a future administrator and ruler; military commander and overseer; at that stage in his life he had no idea about his work in the future. The clear lesson for us today is this: no form of training or life experience is wasted. The skills and knowledge we gain will have a future use. It is most likely that we have no idea at the moment how some things may be used for future good, but we trust the God who holds the future- your future and my future- and our collective future as a congregation in His hands, Amen.