

Exodus 2:11-25 The dangers of going our own way

Introduction

It all looked so promising but then he /she threw it all away. Which names come to mind will reflect our generation! Older members of the congregation will remember the Cabinet minister John Profumo and the ending of his political career at the height of the Cold War era. Those a little younger may think of Jonathan Aitkin and the lie he told in court about an alleged stay at the Ritz Hotel in Paris that cost him his liberty as well as his political career. In the world of sport we can think of Lance Armstrong the cyclist or Ben Johnson the sprinter who had the world at their feet but the use of prohibited substances to advance their careers eventually were discovered and disgrace swiftly followed. These are just a handful of names that come to mind. Each of us will have our own selection of individuals whose bad choices had a devastating effect on their future. However, past failures are not the final word! On the day this sermon is being written Leicester City fans were celebrating the most extraordinary triumph of a football team in the Premier League era. The total cost of their players was less than the individual costs of many players in the squads of their leading rivals. The majority of their players had been rejected as not good enough to make the grade at more prominent rival clubs. Yet the team spirit and effort this season has been a wonder to behold. Although it is likely that this kind of sporting achievement is a 'once-in-a-lifetime' moment, this kind of event provides encouragement to so many people in different contexts to realize that some dreams do come true! There are also biblical stories of redemption from failure and restoration to service, in addition to the one of Moses in Exodus chapter two. Think of Simon Peter for whom most things appeared to be going well as the most prominent follower of Jesus, until the night before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus did warn him of the test that was to come his way later that evening in Luke 22:31-34: '*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you [plural] as wheat.*'³² *But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*'³³ *But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.'*³⁴ *Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know Me.'* Jesus could not have been clearer in warning him about his unwarranted over confidence in his abilities when the pressure was really strong. But this disciple chose to ignore the warning and a matter of hours later denied his Lord and Saviour three times. *The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the cock crows today, you will disown Me three times.'*⁶² *And he went outside and wept bitterly.* (Luke 22:61-62). Was Peter now 'damaged goods' or unsuitable for future Christian ministry? He certainly thought so, but after the resurrection on a beach in Galilee, Jesus restored him to service with a threefold call to future ministry (John 21:15-19). There are too many people who wish to join the Press in the condemnation business. The evil one, Satan, the 'adversary' or 'accuser' wishes to plant that seed of failure and inadequacy in our minds as well. But God has other ideas for the lives of His children. Romans 8:1 reminds us of this fact: *Therefore, there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Do you need to be encouraged to get back into using your gifts in Christian service? Do you need to let go of painful memories of past failures or disappointments in order to help you be more of the person God wants you to be at the present time? If God could do what He did with Moses then he can help you and me get back on track in our lives today.

(1) **The arrogance of Moses** (Exodus 2:11-15a)

(a) **The cause** Moses had grown up in the royal household. He had the best education and training for leadership found anywhere in the world. Stephen's summary of Moses' career to date in Acts 7:22 aptly described this young man. *Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.* Up to the Sixteenth Century AD you could go to university and literally learn almost everything on the curriculum in the different subjects offered to students. In more recent centuries with the explosion of knowledge it became increasingly impossible to be an expert in multiple fields; to the present day where no-one could read the vast output of books and learned articles each year in any one field of study! Josephus, a former Jewish military commander turned historian after defecting to the Romans in the 66-70AD War, wrote a series of books entitled: *The Antiquities of the Jews*. In the 10th section of book two there is a reference to a military career for Moses. Apparently there had been conflict between the Egyptian and Ethiopian armies. The outdated tactics and low morale of the Egyptian forces led to some heavy defeats. As a result a significant number of senior officers were retired and new leaders were appointed to give a fresh impetus to their cause. Moses was apparently appointed the Commanding Officer and through the use of unorthodox tactics surprised the opposition and led the Egyptian army to victory. The relief at the eventual success in the war and then the inevitable praise for the young commander would have been most significant in the career of an individual who appeared to have the world at his feet. How would he handle this level of success so early in his career? There are some people who are great in overcoming adversity showing great resilience, but who struggle to handle their successes, whereas other people take their achievements in their stride, but find it exceedingly hard to handle their failures. There is an element of temperament involved in this issue, but with God's help we can have a right perspective on both our past triumphs and our earlier setbacks; neither must overshadow inappropriately our present or future actions. Is there anyone here struggling to come to terms with past failures? With God's help you can start afresh. However, it is likely that Moses here was having difficulty in handling his successes. The big mistake he was soon to make almost certainly resulted from overconfidence in his own ability to solve problems by taking a short cut. Too often we are rightly keen to pray for someone facing hard times, but how often do we pray that someone can handle their achievements appropriately? It is so easy to forget that success rather than setbacks can be setting for underachievement in some people's lives. Beware of the mistakes you might make when things are going well! It is so easy to switch from confidence in God to relying exclusively on ourselves at such times and heading for a fall. Remember how Jesus took time out for extra prayer after His greatest triumphs, for example, after the extraordinary success of healing and deliverance ministry in Capernaum (Mark 1:35-37: ***Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed.*** ³⁶ *Simon and his companions went to look for Him,* ³⁷ *and when they found Him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for You!')*) and the feeding of 'the five thousand' (Mark 6:45-46: *Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd.* ⁴⁶ ***After leaving them, He went up on a mountainside to pray.***) Does this serve as a challenge to you and me about our attitude to both private and corporate times of prayer?

(b) **The choice** (Exodus 2:11-12) ¹¹ *One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people.* ¹² *Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the*

sand. Although he was thoroughly conversant with the culture and customs of Egypt Moses was nevertheless fully aware of his Hebrew identity. Although living as comfortable a life as anyone in the ancient world, he was acutely aware of the adversity of his people in slavery. Clearly the brutality he witnessed that day was in excess of what normally unfolded on a day-to-day basis. As a professional soldier the decision he took was an easy one and the element of surprise in his action would ensure that the official had no chance to defend himself. Moses was hardly likely to have given him ‘a final warning’ about his conduct prior to the unauthorized killing. Moses had thought that no-one had noticed what he was doing. Yet this was certainly not the case. There is very little that happens in an urban society without at least someone seeing what takes place! The first question to ask about this incident is this: did God want Moses to behave in this way? No! is the obvious answer. The random taking of life by a citizen taking the law into their own hands is always inappropriate. The state alone can carry out the death penalty, but only after due process to establish the guilt of the defendant first. Modern attitudes against the death penalty in principle would have had barely any place in any society until the last couple of centuries. There is a principle to follow here. Two wrongs do not make a right! When someone speaks out of turn or acts in an inappropriate manner we must not compound the error by reacting disproportionately or intervening without careful thought about the best way to address what needs to be changed. By the choice he made Moses made a bad situation many times worse. Moses was to be commended that he did not walk by on the other side of the road and pretend he hadn’t seen what happened as so many people would do today. However, how we intervene is crucial if difficulties are to be resolved. The easiest thing would have been to do nothing. Moses could easily have justified that course of action. Why risk his position in the palace over one slave who might die anyway from the beating he had received? After all he had to see the bigger picture of how his people might be freed from their captivity. However, the course of action he chose was the one with the worst possible outcome.

(c) **The consequences** (Exodus 2:13-15) ¹³ *The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, ‘Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?’* ¹⁴ *The man said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?’* Then Moses was afraid and thought, ‘What I did must have become known.’ ¹⁵ *When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.* The news had clearly got out and spread in both Israelite and Egyptian ranks; Moses was now a marked man. His Hebrew background in this context ensured that his place in the palace was gone forever. In fact, had he been arrested it was very likely that he would have faced the death penalty at the hands of Pharaoh’s officials. Although it appears that Moses was able to escape into the desert fairly easily, what he would do with the rest of his life as a forty-year-old man was less than clear. Any notion that he was going to lead Israel out of Egypt would now have been dismissed as wishful thinking. I have wondered, without coming to any conclusions, whether the exodus from Egypt might have happened forty years earlier had Moses been willing to do God’s work in God’s way? We will never know the answer. What is abundantly clear is that this younger man had been over confident in his ability to accomplish the tasks set before him. It would take time before he became humble enough to allow God to work in him and through him in a manner fitting for the calling upon his life. It is possible that sometimes the delays in God answering our prayers may be due to us or some other person or people not being in the right place to fulfil a particular calling. The request and the calling might be entirely in line with God’s will, but in order for God’s work to be done in His time and His way sometimes there is a work of preparation to be done first in our lives. There is no doubt about this for Moses.

(2) The preparation of Moses (Exodus 2:15b-22)

(a)The place (Exodus 2:15b-17) ... *but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.* ¹⁶ *Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock.* ¹⁷ *Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.* What a come down for Moses to move from a comfortable apartment in a palace to a humble tent in the desert. And for the first few days probably no cover at all as he slept under the stars in the open air; Midian was not entirely devoid of civilization, but it was a very basic existence compared to almost everything he had experienced since his early childhood. As he sat down by the well he must have wondered what lay in store for him in the future. Did he have a future? It must have been a difficult time for him. Yet in those times when we are uncertain about our future to remember *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,* declares the Lord. ⁹ *'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.* ¹⁰ *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,* ¹¹ *so is My word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it* (Isaiah 55:8-11). In the short term we can often see no obvious answers to our confusion. Moses was certainly in that place in Midian. His military skills came in handy in helping these shepherdesses get water for their flocks, but there was hardly a career in view being the guardian of the well! From the hectic pace of his busy life Moses suddenly had unlimited time for quiet reflection. The middle third of his life would be spent in that place in the desert. At the human level we might think it was wasted time when God had a more important work for him to do in leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Professionally many people fail to get promotions or even miss out on the career they had trained for, and struggle to find a reason for it. Other people may get news of a life-changing health problem that means things will never be the same again. The list of potential major issues that might cross our path can be quite high, but whether our pathway appears to be easy or quite difficult, how we view the place in which we find ourselves may make a significant difference to how we progress in our faith journey at that time. What can I learn from this situation in which I find myself? How can I as a Christian trust God with my future? How can I grow as a person through the challenges before me? Sometimes, I believe, it is not the circumstances we experience that are the most important, rather it may be how we react to them and seek to learn from them that is significant. Moses could not change his circumstances, and often neither can we at particular times of our lives. However, what we can control is how we react to the circumstances. There may be something God wants to teach us through a particular situation that may be temporary or permanent, that we cannot learn any other way. Paul, for example, learned to depend on God through having to live with his *thorn in the flesh* (II Corinthians 12:7-10: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.*⁹ *But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'* *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong).*

(b) **The people** (Exodus 2:18-22)¹⁸ *When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, 'Why have you returned so early today?'* ¹⁹ *They answered, 'An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock.'* ²⁰ *'And where is he?'* Reuel asked his daughters. *'Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat.'* ²¹ *Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage.* ²² *Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom saying, 'I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.'* Moses is committed to social justice. His conscience was troubled when he saw wrongdoing taking place and he felt he had a duty to act. This is commendable and what we would expect of a child of God. The challenge so often is what can I do? Or an even more basic question: is there anything that can be done to change this situation? Moses who wanted to help his enslaved fellow Hebrews made things worse by the way he had reacted to injustice. Now faced with a gender discrimination issue he intervenes once again, but this time appropriately and is vindicated with the successful prosecution of his cause. God knew the person He had chosen for the immense task of uniting a demoralized ethnic minority group in slavery and fashioning them into a nation that would be brought out into freedom. This person would not be 'doing a job'. They were called to this task. The world of politics is messy and challenging for a person with high morals and clear convictions, yet step by step God moulded His servant to equip Him for the forty years of service that lay ahead of him. We must pray for the Christians in politics, in the Parliaments and Councils of our land that the Lord would grant them wisdom as they seek to work within a less than perfect system for the good of the people of our country.

The man with whom Moses would find lodgings is known here as *Reuel* and in Exodus 3:1 as *Jethro*. People being known by different names in different contexts was common in the ancient world; Gideon, the unlikely deliverer of Israel was also known as Jerub-Baal (Judges 7:1); in II Kings 15:19, 29, for example, the ruling Assyrian monarch within a few verses was called *Pul* and *Tiglath-Pileser*; This was a man from whom Moses could learn a different style of leadership where persuasion and pastoral leadership rather than force of arms was the approach taken. Jethro was referred to as *a priest of Midian* (Exodus 2:16); unfortunately we know almost nothing about his calling and the duties he undertook; he offered Zipporah his daughter to Moses in marriage and together they had two sons. The first son was named *Gershom* which means 'stranger'. It appears to suggest that Moses was struggling to adapt to his new surroundings. However, the second child is called *Eliezer* which means 'my God is (my) helper'. Exodus 18:2b-4 gives this information: *One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, 'I have become a foreigner in a foreign land';⁴ and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, 'My father's God was my helper; He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'* There appears to be a turning point with the naming of the second son as he is beginning to come to terms with his new circumstances. This is very similar to Joseph in Egypt for whom the birth of his two sons enabled him to close a painful chapter of his life and begin to look forward to the future God had in store for him (Genesis 41:50-52). Jethro will later advise Moses on a method for administering the nation of Israel once they are out of Egypt (Exodus 18:13-27). It is interesting that Exodus 18:24 in summary records: *Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.* Over the next forty years Moses learned to work as a shepherd. It was ironically the least desirable occupation for a citizen in Egypt. In the thinking of the culture in which he grew up Moses held some of the highest offices in the land and now one of the lowest positions. It was all part of the training for his most important calling that would only commence when he was eighty years old. We need to remember that not all our years will necessarily be equally significant in the purposes of God, but all will contribute to us being the person He desires us to be. We remember that Jesus'

earthly ministry was only just over three years in length. Robert Murray McCheyne's famous ministry in Dundee at St Peter's was only seven years long. It is not the length of service that counts, but what we do in the time allocated to us. Making our time count for God is most important. Do you and I need to stop and look at our time priorities? Sometimes we need to reassess what is most important and what is of lesser importance. Is this something you need to do at this time in your life?

(3) **The planning by God** (Exodus 2:23-25)

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. A whole generation of men and women could have died while Moses was in Midian for four decades. Has God forgotten that His covenant people are going through an awful time of enslavement? No! But standing in their shoes for that period of time and praying earnestly throughout it might for some people raise a doubt about the goodness of God. It had taken so long for reasons known only to God, but in part it may have been the time taken for His servant Moses to be prepared for the work that would be entrusted to him. These few short summary verses at the end of Exodus 3 make it clear both that the Israelites had been praying earnestly to God for assistance and also that God had heard their cries. That God who had made covenant commitments to His people would honour them. There is no doubt that had there been no slavery and if the benevolent Hyksos regime still been in power that few Israelites would have wanted to accompany Moses and Aaron into the wilderness on the way back to Canaan. They were living in Goshen the best farming land in the country. They had enjoyed a happy comfortable life there and any move from there was to a simpler and more challenging lifestyle. They would have said 'thank you for the offer Moses but no thanks, we are happy here'. It was in the midst of adversity that the nation was forged and became the Israel as a nation whose descendants we recognize today. Sometimes adversity that happens for a whole variety of reasons can be used by God to develop our characters and strengthen our devotion to Him. He is not the direct cause of the problems, but in His sovereignty allows challenges to test us so that we might grow in our faith and commitment to Him.

In part the delay was to complete the time allowed to the Amorite peoples of Canaan to repent of their sinful practice of child sacrifices, but as they did not do so they forfeited ownership of the land. God also explained to Abram in Genesis 15:13-14 what would happen to his descendants in Egypt. *Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.* God had not forgotten them nor does He forget you and me. In our dark and difficult moments we may feel abandoned, but He promises to never leave us nor forsake us. We can trust Him with our lives and know that He will be at work for our good and for His glory, Amen.