GOD HEARD THEIR GROANING

Exodus 2:11–25

Key Verse: 2:24

“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.”

Have you ever wondered what it takes to be a leader? Do you need a certain personality? Certain innate talents? Exposure to certain life experiences? Perhaps all these are true. But the story of Moses in Exodus shows us what’s needed most. God really took his time with this man Moses, to develop this key trait within him. What is it? We actually find this specific trait mentioned in another book of the Bible. Numbers 12:3 reads, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.” What a statement! Meekness. Humility. What is that? How do you have it? Why do leaders need it? As we think about today’s passage we want to find the answers. But at the end of chapter 2 the author also turns our attention to God himself. These words help us understand better who God is, what he’s like, and why he’s even preparing a leader for his people in the first place. What does this mean to us today? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

In last week’s study we saw how Moses’ mother acted in faith to save his life. Today’s passage contains two events that show us the kind of person Moses was, and how God was preparing him to be the person he could use to deliver his people. Let’s look at verse 11. It says here that Moses “had grown up”; he’s now a man. He’s been brought up in the palace of all Egypt as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He’s been educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Ac7:22). According to the Jewish scholar Philo, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt during the time of Jesus, Moses is now proficient in geometry, arithmetic, poetry, music, philosophy, astrology and all branches of learning (*Life of Moses* 1.20–24). With all the education befitting a prince he’s become powerful in speech and action (Ac7:22). And now he’s 40 years old (Ac7:23a).

Look at verse 11 again. Twice the author mentions here “his people,” meaning the Hebrews. Though he’s grown up as an Egyptian prince, Moses seems aware of his real identity. Probably he came to know it while being nursed by his own mother as a very young child. At that time she probably also tried to instill faith in God in his heart. This identity and faith lasted throughout his lifetime and seem stronger even than all his palace education. Moses is conscious of his own people who are living as slaves of Egypt. It says here that he goes out to his people and looks on their burdens. Their lives are still bitter due to their harsh labor in brick and mortar and all kinds of work in the fields. They’re still being used ruthlessly. Moses can’t turn a blind eye to it; he’s really concerned about their suffering. Genuine concern for one’s own people is essential for a leader.

But then the story develops. Look at verse 12. When he sees this Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, Moses is furious. Maybe he thinks this guy is one bad apple, that things will be better without him. In any case, he first checks to see if no one is watching, then he strikes him down, kills him and hides him in the sand. Though it springs from great love for his people, Moses is taking the law into his own hands, and this is never good. His seemingly noble act in fact becomes a defining failure. Prince Moses becomes a murderer.

Look at verse 13. Despite what he did the previous day, we again see Moses’ keen interest in his people. He tries to settle a dispute among two Hebrews. Maybe he thinks it’s natural for him as a prince to do so. He wants to stop the violence. The problem is, Moses himself has just struck down a man the previous day, which disqualifies him from really helping in this matter. It reminds us that a leader can’t just know what’s right and wrong or be interested in his people; he also actually has to live according to the truth he knows.

Look at verse 14. The man speaking here is “the one in the wrong.” And he’s not happy with Moses. He thinks Moses, as prince of Egypt, has put on airs. And he’s ready to knock him down. He actually saw what Moses did to the Egyptian. Moses now realizes his secret is out. It fills him with fear and devastates his plan to help his people. He decides he’s got to just disappear. All of a sudden, his whole life turns into a completely different direction. This is what crimes of passion still do. We think we can hide them and go on with what we’re trying to do, but in the long run, things never really work out that way.

In Acts 7 Stephen summarizes Israel’s history, even shedding light on what Moses was thinking. Verse 25 says, “Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.” In view of Moses’ princely training it was reasonable to assume, but it was not reality. The reality was, it was not just this one man—the people were rejecting Moses. They didn’t want a lofty man to come in and tell them how to live. It tells us that to be a leader, a person needs to really share the life experiences of his people. And even if he does, he also needs to anticipate that people in their sinful nature will reject and even persecute him (Ac7:51–52). Being a leader is never easy, and as the book of Exodus is going to show us, Moses learns this firsthand.

Look at verse 15. Moses’ life is now forever changed. He’s lost his privileged status and become a fugitive. He ends up out in the land of Midian, which is basically the middle of nowhere. No more glory of a prince, with many servants to attend to his needs. No more luxuries of living in a palace. No more grand ambitions to do something epic. Moses has suddenly become a nobody. He's just sitting by a well, as thirsty and helpless as anybody else. But Moses is not a mere victim of circumstances; he’s chosen this path. In fact, the author of Hebrews tells us that in ending up here, Moses “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” He regarded this disgrace as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt. He was looking ahead to his reward and persevering because “he saw him who is invisible” (Heb11:24–27). Moses has gotten into this situation because he cares more about God’s people than about enjoying the treasures and pleasures of Egypt. It’s a bleak experience out here at this well in the land of Midian, but Moses is not despairing; he’s still holding on to some kind of faith in God.

Now comes the second event. Look at verse 16. While Moses is sitting there, these seven daughters of a priest come to water their father’s flock. It’s a lot of work to fill the water troughs. For Moses, it seems to be, as they say, a moment of romance and history. Look at verse 17. These shepherd guys evidently don’t like these ladies taking over the well. But Moses, ever the hero, always trying to do what’s right, comes to their rescue. We don’t know how many shepherds there were, but Moses single-handedly stands against them all, probably due to his physical training as a prince. Then he himself finishes the job and waters the ladies’ flock. He again shows us a quality of a leader, to defend and protect vulnerable people.

Look at verse 18. The father of the daughters notices that they’ve come home early today. Moses is evidently a lot faster at drawing water than they are. And they explain to their dad what happened. Look at verse 19. Though he’s a Hebrew, Moses still has the look of an Egyptian, perhaps his clothing and hairstyle. In any case, they’re intrigued by him. He not only rescued them from the shepherds; he even did all their work for them! What a guy! And how does their dad respond? Look at verse 20. Basically he’s saying, “Why didn’t you invite him over to thank him with a meal?” To people living out in a desert, hospitality is very important. More than that, this man can see that this stranger is quite a catch! Look at verse 21. Things happened rather quickly. Moses is content to live with this Midianite priest and to marry his daughter Zipporah. Look at verse 22. Here the author highlights most what Moses is thinking at this time. Through naming his son Gershom, he’s expressing how he feels. Though he now has a wife and son, he still feels like a resident alien, a temporary traveler in exile. In Acts 7 Stephen tells us that Moses lives here for 40 years until God calls him. It’s been called his 40 years of exile. What’s he doing there all that time? He's taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep (3:1). He’s also living among the man’s seven daughters, probably being asked by them to do all kinds of tasks.

What is God doing in Moses’ life? He’s developing in him perhaps the most important trait in a leader: humility. Humility is not something we can learn from a book, or in a short time. It can take many years to learn it. Moses’ lesson in humility began with his failure when he killed the Egyptian. It continued when his people rejected his leadership. But it deepened in Midian where he was all but forgotten. Often humility is best learned by just being ignored and left to do menial work for a long time. The Bible tells us: “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons… For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb12:7,11). We have to open our hearts to the discipline of humility to actually grow through it.

Why is humility so important for a leader? In Exodus we’re going to see why. A leader, most of all, needs to listen to God carefully. What if we seem to have the best ideas in the whole world, but are not really listening to God? What good is it? The enemy of listening to God is our own pride. In our pride we think we know. Maybe we don’t think we know better, but we think we know enough, whatever we need to know. With such an attitude, we’re not likely to listen very carefully or learn anything. God wanted to use Moses to give his people his words. To do that, Moses needed to learn the humility not to assume anything, but to really listen carefully to God. God was preparing him for this.

Finally comes the author’s summary. Look at verses 23–25. What stands out here? First, the king of Egypt who had enslaved the Israelites died, but, their abuse as slaves did not. Abusing slaves became the Egyptians’ bad habit. When fallen human beings get a taste of abusing others, they just keep doing it. Also, it says the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. It didn’t bring about any immediate effect. But it says, “Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.” Read verse 24. God wasn’t just having pity; he’s ready to rescue his people from their slavery because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What does this mean? It wasn’t like God forgot that covenant. It means God is ready to bring that covenant to reality. God is ready to make the people of Israel his own people, according to his promises. God is forever faithful to keep his promises. Also, through the experiences of slavery and the exodus, the people will realize firsthand how much they really belong to God. Look at verses 24–25. The verbs the author uses are vivid: God “heard,” God “remembered,” God “saw,” God “knew.” When we suffer it may seem like God is dead. But God is still living. He’s paying close attention to us. In Midian Moses kind of forgot his people. But God didn’t. God is actually their real hope, their only hope. We need to turn to God and cry out to him.

May God help us to put our hope in him. May he help us to accept the discipline of humility so that we can become more useful to him.