



## DAUGHTERS SAVE A SON

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Exodus 2:1-10

Third Message

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The opening chapters of Exodus teach us how God works in the darkest of times to set the stage for his kingdom to break in upon the earth. The lesson is vital. If we fail to understand God's workings in the Exodus, we will also fail to discern the shape of our own history and how God expects us to participate in it, for he has forged the pattern of salvation history after the pattern of the Exodus. During times of national distress or international crisis, the news media direct our attention to heads of state, ambassadors, and ministers of war. Our eyes focus on front line politics, major military exploits and international negotiations. These things matter but, from the Biblical point of view, more often than not they merely set the stage for the real "life players" who act out the drama of God's redemption in the unknown quarters of the world.

In Exodus we learn that when God acts to prepare the way for his salvation to turn darkness into day, the focus becomes highly particular and personal. The narrator dramatically shifts his attention from Pharaoh and his national policy in chapter 1, to the intimate setting of a home in chapter 2. In chapter 1, the text narrowed its focus from "all sons of Israel" (1:7-14) to "all male sons" (1:15-22). In chapter 2, the text becomes even more particular, focusing on the birth of one special son. The family, which remains nameless for the present, appears insignificant against the world forces of darkness. But through this family God will establish the hopes of Israel's future and thwart Pharaoh's murderous decrees.

The text should tell us something about the drama of our own lives. Most of us feel marginalized from the centers of power. Did any of you get an invitation to the inauguration of the new governor of California? Our lives are seldom governed by the extraordinary. We get up in the morning, go to work, sit in traffic, try and survive the boss's tirades, drive home in traffic, eat dinner, help with our children's homework, chauffeur them all over the place, clean endlessly, and collapse into bed. Yet in the context of these ordinary life connections, God's kingdom takes root, infiltrates the world forces of darkness, and finally carries out a brilliant *coup d'état*. My prayer this morning is that God would open our eyes to see how, in very unobtrusive ways, he sets the stage for a new creation, and through ordinary instruments sabotages the sinister plots of the proud.

The text begins with the birth of one baby.

### I. A Son Entrusted to an Ark (2:1-4)

**Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket (lit. "ark") and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank ("mouth") of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen to him. (Exodus 2:1-4 NASB)**

Our story opens with an anonymous priest who, contrary to everything happening in his world, looks death right in the eye and courageously chooses life. Who would want to bring a child into a world in which every son had a price on his head? The odds were 50/50 that the baby would die. Despite that, one priest in Israel will place his trust in the Creator God to increase the line of priests. He marries a Levite woman. The Hebrew verbs "went and married" show how deliberate his choice was. Houtman translates the opening verse, "Nevertheless a man from the family of Levi *dared to take to wife* the daughter of Levi."<sup>1</sup> Not until later do we learn their names are Amram and Jochebed (6:20). For now the narrator withholds their names so as to heighten the urgency, and to place the birth of Moses against the dark backdrop of Pharaoh's death decree.

Life continues in the face of death, and the anonymous couple immediately gives birth to a son. His mother is struck by how "beautiful" (*tov* = "good") he is. The term could be an expression of his fine appearance or, more likely, his "robust" life. This boy is filled with vitality; his Apgar score was a whopping 10! The term "good" is a deliberate allusion to Genesis 1, where God used the word seven times to pronounce that his creation was "good." Life reigns through God's powerful, creative word. Its use here is the first hint that the narrator is suggesting something more about the boy than his health or vitality. Sarna comments, "This parallel suggests that the birth of Moses is intended to be understood as the dawn of a new creative era."<sup>2</sup> In the face of such life, Moses' mother acts with the same courage as the Hebrew midwives. She refuses to obey Pharaoh's decree, and hides her son for three months. But when that time has elapsed she can hide him no longer. Faced with no other recourse, she is forced to give him up.

Ironically, she does what Pharaoh requests, but with a creative twist. Instead of throwing the son into the

Nile and drowning him, she makes him a tiny boat, and with great care places it among the reeds of the Nile so that it doesn't float away. The Hebrew phrase translated "wicker basket" is literally "an ark (*tevah*) of papyrus." The papyrus plant has huge stems which grow to as long as 13 feet, which were used for writing and for the construction of skiffs. The word *tevah* occurs twenty-eight times in the Old Testament. Twenty-six of these instances are found in the story of Noah, describing the "ark" that took him safely through the flood; the only other two are found here. The implication of this reference is clear: when the waters of destruction hang over her people, this woman builds an ark and trusts the Creator-God to see her son safely through them, as he did Noah. This is another hint that the salvation of Moses is going to lead to a cosmic new creation.

As a side note, this text presents us with a theological basis for adoption. When life is being developed in the womb, we are to do everything in our power to work with the Creator-God to nourish and enhance that life. In some cases, however, a young mother may run out of resources. Like the mother of Moses, she may not be able to raise the child. For the child's welfare, she entrusts it into the care of another. It's a painful thing for any young mother to give up her baby, but perhaps the text suggests that she can ultimately entrust her baby into God's care for life. I am again reminded of the work of Vivette Samuel who in 1942, at the age of twenty-two, courageously arranged the adoption of 400 Jewish children into Gentile homes, circumventing Hitler's heinous decrees to exterminate the Jews. Having been the recipient of an adopted daughter, I can say how grateful Emily and I will forever be to the young woman who had the courage to nurture her daughter to full term, and then to entrust us with her life to raise her as our own.

The tension mounts as we wonder what will happen to this abandoned boy. After Moses' mother leaves the basket of reeds with its precious cargo floating in the Nile, Moses' sister stations herself beside the bank to see what will happen to the boy. Through her eyes we become privileged spectators to the events that follow.

## II. The Son Found in the Ark (2:5-6)

**The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." (2:5-6)**

The mood change is dramatic. From tension and terror we are quietly transported into a scene filled with tranquility, that of a princess bathing. Pharaoh's daughter chooses this exact location to bathe. Sarna points out, "An Egyptian princess would not bathe publicly in the mighty, crocodile-infested river itself. One of its private rivulets, where privacy and safety could be en-

joyed, is certainly intended. This suggests that the mother deliberately selected the spot after observing the behavior and habits of this particular princess."<sup>3</sup> Her maidens precede her to ward off spectators, but that doesn't prevent Moses' sister, or the reader, from observing all that follows.

Now the critical moment. Seeing the basket among the reeds, the princess asks her maid to bring it to her. Opening it, she beholds an abandoned baby, a boy. Perhaps now that the gentle rocking of the water has ceased, the boy begins to cry. His cries evoke wells of compassion from the princess. She is moved to pity, but on further investigation discovers the awful truth that this child is a Hebrew, and thus falls under her father's brutal decree. We can sense her inner struggle as she appears to hesitate for a moment. What will she do?

## III. The Son Reunited with his Mother (2:7-9)

**Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go ahead." So the girl went and called the child's mother. (2:7-8)**

Watching from a distance, Moses' sister will not abandon her brother to chance. She bravely rushes in to offer a solution. What courage and faith she demonstrates, risking everything to make a life connection to promote life. Without introduction, she not only bravely approaches royalty, but also proposes a solution without being asked. Her advice encourages all that is true within the princess. As Moses' life hangs in the balance, she tips the scales for life. Not only is Moses saved, he is reunited with his mother.

**Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. (2:9)**

Moses' sister returns with her mother, and Pharaoh's daughter returns the son to his mother. She not only receives her son back, she is paid out of the king's treasury to nurse him – the very thing she wanted most to do. In that culture wet nurses were held in high esteem. They did more than nurse; they tutored and reared the child as a guardian. Later we observe by Moses' character and identification with his people how well his mother had nurtured him in the faith and values of his spiritual forefathers. Is this God's way of telling us that whatever we give up for the kingdom we receive back with wages besides? I am reminded of Jesus' words when Peter gave voice to what it cost him to follow the Savior:

"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms,

along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

The term "wages" is a brilliant reminder of Jacob's story. Striving in his own strength, Jacob secured his "wages" (wife, children, and sheep) from Laban only through extreme toil, but in this text they are given as a gift for one's faith.

#### IV. The Son Adopted by a Daughter (2:10)

**The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water." (2:10)**

After the son is weaned, his mother returns him to Pharaoh's daughter. She adopts him as a son, giving him the name "Moses." Sarna explains, "The high infant mortality rate in the ancient world dictated that formal adoption and naming by the adoptive parent be postponed until after the 'weaning.'"<sup>4</sup> The name she chooses is a common form (*Mose* = son) found in many Egyptian names (Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, and Thotmose). The Hebrew meaning ("to draw out") is quite different, and ironically, reflects more than the princess knows. This boy who was drawn out of the water will one day draw his people through the water and liberate them from Egypt. Unwittingly, the Egyptian mother names the boy with a name that will shape the destiny of the son, and undo the future of her father.

This succinct text is densely packed with drama and theological implications. I would like to close with four reflections from the themes presented.

#### V. Daughters Save a Son: Reflections

##### A. The instruments God uses

This text continues the theme, begun in chapter 1, of the important role that women can have during dark times to set the stage for the kingdom of God. Moses' father is mentioned in the opening verse, but then he drops off the stage. The leading roles are given to three women who do what women do best – birth, nurture, and protect life. Their actions would never make the national headlines, but this is where the narrator takes our focus. So often when evil seems to rule the day we want to burst on the scene and attack it head on with brute force. We want God's rule to break in with power. But our text suggests that God is perhaps more subversive. When he wants to defeat evil, he visits an anonymous couple with a baby. Paul would formulate the truth in these words,

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (1 Cor 1:27-29)

##### B. The need for creating "life-connections"

As I observe these women I am encouraged not only by the fact that they worked with the Creator to preserve life, but the "way" in which they did it. Confronted with life, Moses' mother quietly refuses to obey Pharaoh's decree, and by faith first hides the son, until she can hide him no longer. Then she gives him up, trusting him to the Creator God who preserved Noah through the flood. The reward for her faith is that she not only receives her son back, she is able to nurse him freely, in full view of the public eye, and for wages!

If Moses' mother exemplifies faith, his sister is a model of courage. Leaving nothing to chance, she courageously steps in to make a life-connection with the daughter of Pharaoh. Risking her own life, she prompts this daughter of royalty to follow everything that is good within her (her compassion), and in so doing preserves the life of her brother, securing for him the best education in Egypt. Here are women of faith and courage preserving life along the sacred highway of life-connections that God had given them. This is something we desperately need to learn as Christians. So much of our modern-day Christian witness, though done with good intentions, often creates more alienation than "connection." It takes great skill to know how to enter into other cultures in non-condemning ways and create connections for life. May we follow in the footsteps of these women.

##### C. Watching for the invisible hand of God

The third thing in the text that impresses me is observing the invisible hand of God thwarting Pharaoh's decrees behind the scenes. Terence Fretheim in his excellent commentary points out no less than eight instances of divine irony in the passage:

1. Pharaoh's chosen instrument for destruction (the Nile) is the means of saving Moses.
2. As in 1:15-22, the daughters are allowed to live, and it is they who now proceed to thwart Pharaoh's plans.
3. The mother saves Moses by following his orders (with a twist).
4. A member of his own family undermines his policies, saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the dynasty.
5. Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew girl's advice!
6. The mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do, and from Pharaoh's own budget (anticipating 3:22)!
7. Moses is educated to be an Israelite leader, strategically placed within the very court of Pharaoh.
8. The princess gives the boy a name that betrays much more than she knows (including a Hebrew etymology for an Egyptian name); what she has done for Moses, God will do for all Israel.<sup>5</sup>

This repeated use of irony is designed to give us eyes of faith, especially during evil days, to see how God prepares his stage for redemption. Later saints would draw on texts like these to understand that God would allow evil purposes to be carried out, only to use them as the very means of their own destruction. As David cried out from his dark cave in Psalm 57,

They have prepared a net for my steps;  
 My soul is bowed down;  
 The dug a pit before me;  
 They themselves have fallen into the midst of it.  
 (Ps 57:6, cf. Ps 7:15-16)

#### D. The glory of God: His vulnerability

But beyond these things, the text teaches something of the glory of God that is seldom magnified. There is something supremely glorious about an all-powerful Creator God allowing the destiny of his people to be determined by the fate of a baby abandoned on a river of destruction. Financial analysts tell us never to put all our eggs in one basket. They counsel us to always hedge our bets, minimize risk, and disperse our investments for a secure future. But this is not God's way. He was fully invested in that little ark. God was absolutely dependent on the faith, courage and compassion of three anonymous women to preserve life in an era of legalized murder. When one child is lifted out of the waters of annihilation, we all breathe a sacred silence. This makes us feel the weight of holiness and the value of every life – something that God feels so intimately. God's vulnerability thus grants human beings a stage to play his role on earth, for what these daughters did for Moses, God will do later for the nation. He will *see* their plight, *hear* their cries, *take pity* on them, and finally, *adopt* them as his own.

This would not be the last time when Israel's future would hang on the precarious life of an infant. The birth of Moses becomes the framework for the birth of Jesus. God's vulnerability allows himself to be exiled from his world and to experience homelessness in ours. He takes his habitation in the flesh of a helpless babe, who like Moses was under sentence of death, and dependent on the faith and courage of his parents to save him from Herod's senseless slaughter that covered Bethlehem in blood. God in his glory is willing to be homeless and vulnerable. He is a God who sees suffering from the inside,<sup>6</sup> which makes his salvation all the more glorious. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

### Three Daughters Save a Son

Exodus 2:1-10

#### Literary Outline

- 2:1-2a    A A son of Levi is born
- 2:2            B The mother hides her son
- 2:3            C The mother gives up her son (by faith)
- 2:4            D The sister (of the son) watches
- 2:5-6            X Pharaoh's daughter takes pity on the crying child
- 2:7            D' The sister volunteers to acquire a Hebrew nurse (courage)
- 2:8            C' The mother receives back her son
- 2:9            B' The mother nurses the son (no longer in secret) for wages
- 2:10          A' A son is adopted and named

1. Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus Vol.1 HCOT* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 266.
2. Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 9.
3. Sarna, *Exodus*, 9.
4. Sarna, *Exodus*, 10.
5. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 37.
6. For an excellent treatment of this theme see Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

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