
Prayers

To God

Praise God for Creation

Give thanks to God for the beauty of your surroundings. If you have access to the countryside, this can be your inspiration, but it need not be. Even if you live in a city, it is not impossible to see something of the power and majesty of God in your surroundings.

For myself

Pray that your heart never lacks the zeal to follow Christ wherever He may lead. Offer yourself to God unreservedly and wait on Him for His guidance, even for this day.

For others

Almighty God, You see the suffering of countless peoples throughout the world. May your heart for suffering people prompt us to action, wherever we can, to deal with the problems in our world that lead to human anguish. Come amongst us, Lord Jesus, and open our eyes to see what You see and to do what You would have us do. We ask this for the good of all, and for the glory of Your Kingdom. AMEN

Meditation

When do I pray?

Every day? Every few days?

When I think of it? From time to time?

The Lord says: 'I'm open all hours'.

How do I pray?

In a word? The odd sentence?

Set words? From the heart?

The Lord says: 'Speak as you wish'.

Where do I pray?

When at home? By myself?

Only with others? At Church?

The Lord says: 'I'm always there'.

What do I pray?

About me? About my family?

About my work? About my call?

The Lord says: 'Just talk to me, please ...'

Bible Passage

Exodus 2:1-10

¹ There was a man from the house of Levi who married a Levite woman. ² She conceived and gave birth to a son, and when she saw that he was a healthy baby, she hid him for three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer, she obtained a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister placed herself at a suitable distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ Now, Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe while her attendants walked beside the river, and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.

⁶ When she opened it, she saw the baby, and he was crying; so she took pity on him. She said this;

'He must be one of the Hebrew babies.'

⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter,

'Shall I go and call one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?'

⁸ She replied,

'Yes, go on.'

So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter then said to her,

'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay you.'

So the woman took the child and nursed it, ¹⁰ and when the boy grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, and said,

'I drew him up out of the water.'

Review

This is the beginning of the story of Moses, the great leader of God's people, specially chosen by the Lord to bring deliverance to His people. Like a number of other major stories in the Bible, such as the life of Samuel (1 Samuel 1f.) and the story of Jeremiah's life and prophecies (Jeremiah 1), we begin with the story of a special birth. We have been prepared for this by Exodus 1, which describes the plight of Israel within Egypt several decades after the life of Joseph, when Pharaoh had threatened the life of all Hebrew baby boys. But God was intent on raising up a saviour for His people, and in this beautiful story, we read about how He began to do this.

The story of Moses' birth and childhood is set against a background of dire cruelty, but the story itself is full of tenderness and human warmth. The contrast between the two is dramatic, and in particular, it shows the essential humanity of the women involved, both Hebrew and Egyptian. Anyone who reads the Bible will spot that all this is typical of many of the other 'birth stories' in Scripture. So it should be no surprise to us to find that when God finally sends His own Son to be the Saviour of the World, the Saviour comes as a child and against a backdrop of state cruelty (see Matthew's description of Herod in Matthew 2 and Luke's description of the Roman occupation in Luke 2). These are longstanding themes of God's saving work from early on in the Old Testament.

The story of begins with drama. Young male Hebrew children were under a sentence of death, and the Levite woman (who is unnamed in this passage) only did what we imagine many others attempted; she tried to find a way to save her baby. Her maternal instincts for the saving of her child are then taken up by the Lord and used in ways she could never have imagined. The mother was presumably young, and she had an older sister who played a crucial role in the story (2:4,7). Her baby was not named straight away, presumably because the mother feared naming a child when he might not live. The boy is named much later, after he has been 'saved' from the water (2:10). Later on in Exodus, we will discover a little more about Moses' family (Exodus 15:20), but this passage is focussed on the baby himself and his escape from certain death.

Interestingly, the young baby was placed by his mother in a watertight basket, using materials which were the same as those used by Noah to create his Ark; that is, '*bitumen and pitch*' (2:3)! Scripture often uses words in special ways to bring to our attention what God was doing, and the story of God's salvation now emerging will be no less dramatic than the story of Noah's flood! Now, the mother may not have known that God was using her, but what she did was no casual act; it was part of a careful plan. She placed her baby at the water's edge where he could be spotted, and stationed her sister nearby to ensure he came to no harm and take advantage of what might happen. Moses' mother planned his salvation, but God was planning the salvation of Israel.

Moses' mother's plan was successful, and at this point, her plan is also God's plan. The boy was too important for the future of Israel. Having placed her child just where she knew the daughter of Pharaoh would come to bathe, she hoped that this delicate royal woman would notice her child and have pity on him. Remarkably, her plan worked! Pharaoh's daughter was moved by the crying of the baby, summoned assistance, and the mother's sister was on hand to respond. Everyone was happy! Baby and mother were reunited, albeit somewhat illegally, and the baby could now be weaned by his mother until Pharaoh's daughter claimed him at court (2:9). As we will discover, every feature of the story told here is significant for what would lie ahead..

However, there is more than a hint of irony within the plot of the story. God used an Egyptian member of Pharaoh's court to save a Hebrew child who should have been killed. This same child was reared and trained at court, and one day, would return to that court (Ex 5-11) as Pharaoh's opponent, to negotiate the deliverance of his own people, the Hebrews, from slavery, thus denying Pharaoh a major part of his workforce! In Old Testament times, the way that God manipulated Egypt and Pharaoh's court for His own purposes was a matter of great interest, and it inspired the prophets. If God could manipulate the Egyptians to do His will, they believed that He could also use the other great worldly powers, even Babylon and the Persian Empire, (e.g. Isaiah 45:1f., Ezra 1:1f.) in order to do His will. They were used by God to teach Israel the hard lessons of obedience to their God and make them repent. This idea challenges us even today, because it reminds us that He is able to work 'outside the box' of His own people when it comes to achieving what he wants within the world.

The final verse of our passage deals with the naming of Moses. The translation says that Moses' royal parent named him using a word meaning 'to draw up out of water' (2:10), derived from the Hebrew word 'mashah'. However, there is some distance between the words 'Mashah' and Moses', and these words do not bear the hallmarks of an ancient Hebrew name, although, quite obviously, Moses is a classic Jewish name now. Scholars tell us that the name Moses is indeed close to the Egyptian word for 'to have a son', and for this reason, some think that the Egyptian princess originally gave Moses this name intending it to mean 'Son'. With this in mind it is possible to translate the last verse of our passage like this:

When the boy grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son, and named him Moses (meaning 'son'). She said, 'I got him from the water!'

It is not easy to be faced with such possibilities, but we need to consider them. Personally, I prefer to accept the traditional version of scripture, for this important reason. Moses' name meaning 'drawn out of water' points us forwards in time to the dramatic saving work of God at the very heart of the book of Exodus and the pinnacle of Moses' prophetic work as Israel's leader, when he parted the Red Sea and led the people of Israel through on dry land and defeated the armies of Pharaoh (Exodus 14). I reckon this trumps all other potential candidates for the meaning of Moses' name!

Going Deeper

Further Comments

This touching story begins with the birth of a child and ends with a prophecy of deliverance contained within the child's name. Each part of it tells a very human story which has appealed to people throughout the centuries. There are many questions raised by the story, but it remains a powerful description of the way God works through even the strangest of events to bring about His purposes.

The Levite woman, the baby and the papyrus basket

Moses was born to a Levite couple, that is, members of the tribe of Levi, son of Jacob. Because of the great importance of Moses to the whole history of God's people, the subject of his family was one of great intrigue in later generations. Exodus itself yields only a little interesting information about the family, and this fills out some of the human details which helps us to feel that we can relate to the story. In Exodus 6:20, Moses' parents are identified as Amram and Jochebed, though their exact genealogical connection with Levi is not given anywhere in Scripture. Many people have assumed that Moses was the firstborn son, but we can only guess at this. He may have been the first son, but he did at least have an older sister who looked after him in this story. Tradition suggests that this was Miriam, Moses' sister (15:20, Deut. 24:9 etc.) who is described as a prophetess, singing a great song of deliverance after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 15). However, we should be cautious about assuming too much. In those days, families were large, and there may well have been a number of sisters who could have fulfilled these roles. In addition, we know that Aaron was Moses' brother (or half-brother; the Hebrew text is not clear), and this should warn us to be content with what Scripture tells us, and no more.

It was the tradition of the people of Israel to name babies after 8 days, but the dire state of the people meant that such social niceties were not the main concern. Survival was all, and it is not too hard to imagine how a woman might plan what to do if they gave birth to a baby boy in these difficult social circumstances. Moses' mother hid the child 'for three months' (2:2), and she then put her plan into immediate effect (2:3). It had to work quickly, for a newborn baby would not have been able to survive long when left abandoned in a river like this. The details of the story in verses 3 and 4 add to the suspense of the story, and also the strong impression that it was highly planned; but that does not mean to say that God was not working powerfully through everything, in ways that the people involved may not have fully understood.

Scholars have always observed that there are strong literary connections between the papyrus basket made for Moses and the Ark made by Noah. For example, the papyrus basket made by the young woman is described with a unique Hebrew word 'tebah', which means 'box', and is used only here and with reference to Noah's Ark in Genesis 6:14. In both cases, the basket and the Ark are made watertight by 'pitch' (2:3 see also Gen 6:14); so

these and other connections are Scripture's way of saying that God was working uniquely through these events to achieve His saving purposes

Balancing this reference to salvation in the past, the passage also gives us something which points forwards, and not backwards. The basket was placed amongst 'reeds', a word for which the Hebrew is 'suph'; this is the same as the name of the sea which the people of Israel walked through 'on dry land' at Moses' command (14:15f.); literally, the 'yam suph'. This sea is traditionally reckoned to be the 'Red Sea', or some part of the upper reaches of it, but the Hebrew words 'yam suph' mean 'Sea of Reeds'! Again, it may be tempting to think that the connection is only casual, but Hebrew stories are frequently told using word patterns and connections such as this to bring out the story lines and themes.

Pharaoh's daughter, the sister, and Moses' mother

As the story unfolds, there is a tender, feminine feel within the way it is told. Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe (presumably at some known or favoured spot), and saw the basket containing the young baby, sending her maid to investigate. In a simple but moving sentence, Scripture tells us that she immediately warmed to the small child who was crying (2:6). On the one hand, we can all imagine the scene quite vividly, but some of the power of the story lies in the emotive response that this evokes in us; for the cries and the helplessness of the baby have secured its safety. It was an entirely natural response from the child, but through it, salvation was secured and God's will was done. Moreover, Pharaoh's daughter knew full well what was going on. Her words, 'this must be one of the Hebrew babies' indicate that she knew the plight of the Hebrews, she was aware that babies were being thrown into the Nile, and she was rescuing one of them against the will of her father, Pharaoh.

We must not assume that this daughter of Pharaoh was necessarily very close to her father, though. As a daughter, she had privileges within the large extended family of Pharaoh and the court, but a great Pharaoh might have had large numbers of sons and daughters, and from what we know about their lives, it is likely they had little to do with most of their offspring except perhaps one or two favourites. This daughter was distant enough from her father to act against his will without fear of retribution, but sufficiently provided for to be able to command an entourage of servants and determine her own place and security at court. As a higher ranking Egyptian, she showed remarkable compassion by accepting the child, and apparently knowingly, asking for the child to be cared for by a Hebrew woman. She had, in effect, adopted him for reasons we are not told; but although we hear no more of her in the story, she clearly knew what she was doing.

The whole of this story leads us carefully towards its beautiful climax; through the vigilant placement of the child's sister, his own mother was called to look after him until Pharaoh's daughter felt it right to introduce him to court. It is a story with a happy ending! The happy ending was important and powerful enough for those involved at the time, but it shows that God's purposes are to bless, and not to curse. This passage in Exodus is the beginning of a long story which, by the power of God, will have a different happy ending through the deliverance of all the Hebrew people from slavery.

Discipleship

Application

Trusting in God in difficult circumstances

This story contains some helpful spiritual guidance if we look just beneath the surface of the story. There is much in here about trusting God in the most extreme of circumstances, and the risks, as well as astute planning that we must sometimes take on the path of faith. If we were to place ourselves in the position of the young Levite mother, we could then imagine her planning, her trusting that God would save her child, her anticipation of what might happen, maybe with some doubts about it, and some prayer to Almighty God that her child would be safe. This is a great example of faith in action, which was rewarded by God's use of her child, Moses, for the salvation of His people.

In the same way, our trust in God must sometimes be put to the test, and we must place something we love into God's hands, just as the mother placed her child in the water. He can use such faith powerfully.

God uses people outside of His own

This passage also tells us, as Scripture frequently does, that God is able to use even those outside His chosen people, in order to achieve His purposes. Here, He uses Pharaoh's daughter and her entourage. Indeed, we will find out next that God uses the Egyptian court to train Moses for God's tasks, which lie ahead. In our own lives, we should always expect to find that God uses all manner of things and people around us to do His will in our lives and those of others, and this will sometimes require us to trust God absolutely. We may prefer to think that people outside of the church are untouched by God, but He is constantly at work in their lives, either to draw them to Himself (if this is His will) or to use them for His purposes in other ways, perhaps even to help us. Clearly, He uses other people in this story for good, but this is not always true.

If we keep this in mind, we will have our eyes open for what God will do around us and we will find that He is sometimes at work in people we least expect. He does not always save those He uses, but certainly brings a message to His people through them. Of course, they must ultimately answer themselves for what they believe about the God of Israel, who made all things and sent Jesus into the world to be our Saviour.

Ideas for what to do

- How has God used people and events outside of the church and the Kingdom of God, to affect your life? This is worth thinking about because it means that we should have our eyes attuned to the possibilities of God's grace and judgement being revealed to us through many different things in life. The possibilities are infinite!
- Write down what you consider to be a plan for your life for the coming months. Is this plan simply a straightforward projection of current possibilities? Pray about this for a bit, and then re-write it including some 'outside the box' spiritual and godly possibilities that might take you places where you have not yet been. What does this make you feel? Put such things to God in prayer.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which part of this story affects you most and makes you 'feel' what is going on?
2. Why do you think that God had to use Pharaoh's daughter in this way? Why could he not raise a child to deliver His people from within His people, excluding the Egyptians?
3. What motives might Pharaoh's daughter have for doing what she did?

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus. You love all the children You have made, and You watch them as they grow and as they respond to the world around them. May we be sensitive to the needs of small children and seek to care for them in a manner that reflects Your love, so that one day, they may understand the truth of the Gospel. AMEN
