

The deliverer needs a Deliverer

by Scott Grant

Great expectations

Not long ago I went on a fishing trip to Idaho with two friends who are just learning how to flyfish. They were so excited the night before that they could barely sleep. On the way to the creek they each fell into muskrat holes because all they could think about was fishing. They each had a strong vision for this trip that involved fighting big trout up and down the creek. But the fishing was more difficult than they anticipated. One friend spent the entire first day floating his fly over a squadron of huge trout that slurped up every fly on the water but his. Halfway through the second day, the other friend, frustrated that he still hadn't caught a fish, cried out to me for help. I went over and gave him some pointers and tried to encourage him, but he was beyond consolation. At some point each friend had a new vision that involved something to do with his fishing equipment. The first was thinking about selling all of it. The other, who was given most of his equipment, was agonizing over how he would explain to his benefactors that he was no longer going to use it. Each had a vision of hope, but each felt like a failure.

This story plays itself out in the stories of our lives on a much grander scale. We start out with exuberant visions of hope, but we often end up feeling like failures. It's comforting to know that such was also the case for one of the Old Testament's most towering figures: Moses.

Moses appears for the first time in Exodus 2. Exodus 1 records the effort of the Egyptian king to rein in the Hebrew people. First, he subjects them to hard labor. Second, he orders the midwives to kill the newborn males. Third, he orders that the newborn males be cast into the Nile. His first two plans fail. Despite the hard labor, the people multiply. Two Hebrew midwives disobey the king's orders to kill the babies, and once again the people multiply. Exodus 2 records what happens to the king's third plan. Not surprisingly, it too fails.

Structurally, the story can be seen in six sections, with the climax coming in the middle two sections (C, C'). The story therefore emphasizes the success of God's deliverance over and against the failure of man's deliverance.

A 2:1-2 Marriage and a son

B 2:3-5 Water of deliverance (Nile)

C 2:6-10 Success of God's deliverance

C' 2:11-15 Failure of Moses' deliverance

B' 2:16-20 Water of deliverance (well)

A' 2:21-22 Marriage and a son

Moses has a vision to be a deliverer. But beginning in Exodus 2, he begins a long and arduous personal journey to learn dependence on God.

God's deliverer receives deliverance (2:1-10)

Here is God's answer to the Egyptian king's plan to drown the newborn Hebrew males. Globally, here is

God's plan for deliverance. It doesn't look like much. A man and woman, whose names aren't even mentioned, marry, and they have a baby. One helpless little baby. This is God's way. Several hundred years later another helpless little baby would be born to two seemingly insignificant people. If heaven hadn't alerted some shepherds and a few men from the east, his birth would have gone completely unnoticed. Who would have thought to look for God's deliverance in a feed trough?

The mother of this baby "saw" that he was "beautiful," the same words that are used in God's reaction to his creation in Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21 and 31 (in the Genesis account, the word translated "beautiful" [*towb*] in Exodus 2:2 is translated "good"). God, in creating the nation of Israel and delivering it through Moses, is embarking on a new creation.

Moses' mother hid him for as long as she could, protecting him from those who would cast him into the Nile, but when she could no longer, she put him into a wicker basket, which she placed into the river. The Hebrew word for "basket" (*tebah*) is used in only one other story in the Old Testament - that of Noah and the flood. There the word is translated "ark." Noah and Moses were each placed in an ark. The significance is that an ark is not a sailing vessel. The occupants of a vessel can steer it and raise and lower sails. The occupants of an ark can't do anything; they are at the mercy of the elements. More importantly, they are at the mercy of God. They are completely dependent on him. Moses, the helpless infant deliverer, is completely dependent on God as he floats down the Nile. But he is safe and secure, for the basket is covered with tar and pitch.

Moses' mother "put" him in the ark. This is the same word that is used in Genesis 2:8, where it says God "placed" the man in the garden. Peter relates the story of Noah to baptism (1 Peter 3:19-21). As Noah and Moses were each delivered by being placed in an ark, believers in Christ are delivered by being baptized, or placed, into Christ (Galatians 3:26-27). This happens not when one is baptized with water but when one places his or her faith in Christ. Like Noah and Moses, we are completely dependent on God for deliverance. We cannot deliver ourselves. And like Moses in the wicker basket we are safe and secure in Christ.

Moses' experience, then, prefigures ours. It also prefigures the entire nation's experience. Moses' mother places him among the "reeds." A literal translation of the Red Sea, which all of Israel passed through, is "Sea of Reeds." Moses, as the leader of the nation, must first experience what he's calling the people to experience. He also experiences 40 years in the wilderness, just like the nation.

In launching Moses into the Nile, his mother puts him in a place where he is almost certain to be found. Ancient women would constantly gather at rivers to wash and to prepare food. Her action was the modern-day equivalent of leaving a baby at the doorsteps of an orphanage. When a baby was found, it was standard procedure to hire a "wet nurse" to feed and raise him or her for two to three years, according to ancient Mesopotamian legal texts.

But the turnabout in this particular arrangement is anything but standard. Pharaoh ordered that the Hebrew male babies be drowned. First, his own daughter ends up being Moses' savior. Second, royal money supports the raising of the child. Third, God's deliverer is raised in Pharaoh's own house, right under his nose. Pharaoh's fiendest plans backfire. Satan's fiendest plans to destroy God's promised seed, or descendant - that is, Christ - backfires.

Thus, God's deliverer is delivered.

For those of us who believe in Christ, God has delivered us as well. It is a deliverance that took us by surprise - we never would have dreamed of it. We might have thought that deliverance would come through some ingenious organization of man that resulted in building something like a tower that reached all the way to heaven. Instead, heaven reached down to earth, and a little baby was born in a feed trough. Preposterous. Moses' mother "saw" that he was "beautiful" (*towb*). After God created man, he "saw" that all his creation was very "good" (*towb*). When God sees us, he sees beauty and goodness. He sees value and worth. He considers us worth delivering. So he placed us in Christ, who safely delivered us from the waters of judgment. We were out of control and had nothing to do with it. Satan's evil intentions for us were thwarted, because God's intentions for us were good.

When I was 15-year-old high school sophomore, I went to my first dance. Before I went into the gym, I saw my friend Ken, who had been curiously unavailable the previous summer. It seems Ken became involved in a church youth group. I was going to a dance. God had other plans. I met many of the people Ken had spent his time with over the summer. I was more than delighted a few days later when Ken asked if I wanted to attend the youth group. God looked on me and saw someone worth delivering. He placed me in Christ, and that was confirmed three months later when I expressed my belief in Christ. I had nothing to do with it; I was simply going to a dance. Christ was the last thing on my mind. Who knows what intentions Satan had for me that night. But God's intentions for me were good.

It is crucial for us to understand God's grace. How we live depends on it. Moses begins his adult life like the rest of us - with little understanding.

God's deliverer can't deliver (2:11-15)

At this point, God has not yet called Moses. But this desire to be involved in God's deliverance is already deep within him, in a way that he probably can't understand. In two episodes in this section, and in the first episode in the next section, Moses rises to the defense of the oppressed. He has the desire to liberate people. It is a good desire. Surely, it is a God-given desire, for God would one day match that desire with his call.

Moses has desires. Good desires. Perhaps a vision is forming. The text tells us Moses has "grown up." He's an adult. A man. He's been waiting a long time. Now he's ready. His time has come.

He "went out to his brethren." Purposefully, he went to his people, for whom he was rightly burdened. Surely, he knew of their afflictions. Now he wants to see the dimension of it. An Egyptian is beating one of his brethren. He sees a need. He has the desire. The need matches the desire, so he acts. He delivers.

Only one thing is missing: God. Without God, he has no identity. So he feels the need to establish one. He has the desire to deliver, so that will be his identity: Moses the Deliverer. But he doesn't understand God's grace. He doesn't appreciate that God has delivered him. He was a helpless baby, destined for death in the waters of the Nile. But God delivered him from the hand of evil. If he had appreciated this, he would have actively involved God in his life, and he would have had no need to establish himself. He would have seen that he was already established.

We can surmise that all this is true because before he struck down the Egyptian, "he looked this way and that" to see if anyone was watching. Someone whose identity is firmly rooted in God doesn't need to look "this way and that" to see if he can get away with some clandestine plan. Such a person would be confident in God. Such a person would look to God, not "this way and that." When Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh with evidence of God, Pharaoh "turned" and went away (7:23). He had no interest in God. The word for "turned" (*panah*) is the same word for "looked" in 2:12. Moses was not interested in turning to God. Therefore, he was a fearful, insecure man.

God is the deliverer, not Moses. Moses "struck down" one Egyptian, then hid the body in fear. God would "strike down" all of Egypt's first-born (12:12). When God strikes down Egypt, there will be no need to hide the bodies. The land will be filled with them. God delivered Moses, and God will deliver Israel. Moses didn't deliver himself, and he can't deliver Israel. God is the deliverer. Moses is God's servant.

But Moses doesn't realize this. So he "went out the next day." He's still looking for an identity, but he's not looking for God. The text says "behold," which indicates that something unexpected was happening. Two Hebrews were fighting with each other. This isn't the way it's supposed to be. The Hebrews are supposed to be unified in their opposition to Egypt. Moses tries to bring unity, but with a heart for the oppressed, he challenges the offender. The offender asks two crushing questions.

First, he asks, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us?" The answer, of course, is no one. Moses was thrusting himself forward into a position of leadership, but he was 40 years too soon. God had not yet called. Moses had the desire, but not the dependent relationship with God that would be integral to his call as a leader. At this time, he is confident in himself, not God, so he wilts.

The second question is, "Are you intending to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" With this question, Moses realizes that his best efforts to cover up his actions of the previous day have failed. He fears the repercussions of the Egyptians. He fears men, not God. Moses the deliverer knows he can't deliver himself. But all he has is himself, so he's afraid.

His first confrontation with Pharaoh is an utter disgrace. Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses, but Moses flees. Twice Moses "went out" to establish himself. Then he "fled" from Pharaoh in fear. God's mighty deliverer is a complete failure.

Like Moses, we have desires swirling deep within us. They are good desires, God-given desires that concern involvement with people. Sometimes we can't define them. Sometimes we can. We develop hopeful visions, perhaps concerning marriage and children or career or ministry. Like Moses, we've "grown up." We're adults, men and women. We're tired of waiting. We think our time has come. We say, "This is it. Now is the time. I'm going for it." Perhaps we're too scared to act outwardly but we cling to inward fantasies. But maybe, like Moses who "went out," we too go out.

But something is missing: God. We are lacking in appreciation for God's deliverance, so we don't find our identity in him. Without an identity, we seek to establish one, and these inner desires we have then become the focal point of our search for an identity, not the God who gives the desires. Instead of looking to him, we "look this way and that," terrified of what people think of us - covering up and trembling with fear because all we have to depend on is our undependable selves. When the penetrating questions come, either from without or within, we crumble, because we're afraid of the answers. So these good things that we desire, around which we seek to build our lives, never come to pass. And we feel like complete failures. So we run in fear. We withdraw from life. We hide from anything that might hurt us, particularly people.

My first job out of college was working as a reporter and editor for a small newspaper. One of my responsibilities was covering the local high school football team. The team had a new coach that year. It was his first year as a coach, and he was seeking to establish himself. The team got off to a poor start, losing its first few games. At halftime of the next game, the team, as usual, was trailing. An assistant coach was away that weekend on a hunting trip. The head coach told the players that he had just heard some terrible news. The assistant coach had been shot and quite possibly killed in a hunting accident. He told the players this to inspire them for the second half. There were two problems with his inspirational speech. The first problem was that it failed miserably. The players were devastated by the news and played the rest of the game limply. The bigger problem was that the story was a lie, a complete fabrication designed solely to pump up the team. A first-year coach went out to establish himself, seeking an identity because he had none in God. He was fired before the next game.

If we feel like failures, there's good news: God loves failures. We learn humility through humiliations. And God works with us, picking up the pieces.

God's deliverer delivers (2:16-22)

Moses flees to Midian, which is in the wilderness. He goes to the wilderness, where all God's people end up to learn about God. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness, as did Israel. Paul went to the wilderness of Arabia (Galatians 1:17). Christ spent 40 days in the wilderness; then he was ready.

Moses sits down by a well. He doesn't "go out," as he did before. He just sits there, probably questioning himself. He isn't seeking to deliver anyone. Then seven women "came" to draw water (2:16). Those who need deliverance come to him. When he's given up on establishing himself, something comes to him that awakens those hidden desires. The text says he "helped" (*yasha'*) them, which is translated "save" elsewhere, particularly with respect to God's salvation (14:30). The women tell their father that Moses "delivered" them (2:19).

When Moses had given up on being a deliverer, he becomes a deliverer. He saves the women from the shepherds, and he waters their flock. This little episode prefigures Moses' later role as a deliverer of Israel,

when he leads the people out of bondage in Egypt and gives them water in the wilderness (15:25, 17:6). In this, then, God offers encouragement to Moses, showing him that his desire to be part of God's plan of deliverance is good.

These desires within us are good, but if we don't find fulfillment in them because we've idolized them, we may be inclined to destroy them. God would not have us destroy something good, even though we may have perverted it. When we try to crush our God-given desires, we are trying to crush God, a futile and self-destructive way of living. But often when we give up trying to satisfy our desires, then God satisfies them. Then we get a little hint or two that God has a place for us. We are refreshed by the affirmation that our desires are good, even if we've idolized or perverted them. But often we have to exhaust ourselves first, either in active pursuit of our desires or in an inner fantasy life that wears us out. Finally, we sit down. Then something comes to us - a little gift from God to remind us that he hasn't given up on us.

In Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is ready to give up on life because he feels that everyone would be better off without him. He's about to throw himself off a bridge and into a river. And then heaven sends him a gift - a little angel named Clarence who jumps into the river himself and screams for help, knowing that George would be inspired to save him. The plan works, and George saves Clarence. By kindling his noble instincts, Clarence begins the long process of showing George that his life is anything but a waste. Every once in a while, God sends us such gifts that kindle our noble desires to be involved with people.

In this episode, God also shows Moses that God is the true deliverer and that deliverance will be carried out in God's way and in God's time. That time will be 40 years hence.

Moses, then, is once again taken in and nurtured by a foreign family, just as he was as a child. God's sustenance comes from the strangest sources. God's deliverer is delivered once again. And he's given a wife and a son. In the wilderness, God brings forth fruitfulness. Moses names his son "Gershom," which means "a stranger there." He is a sojourner in the wilderness. And in the dry barren wilderness, where nothing makes sense, sustenance comes from the strangest sources. That sustenance, therefore, must be from God. Moses begins to learn dependence. In the wilderness, God builds his deliverer.

Up until this point in the chapter, God has been silent. He is never mentioned. He is only mentioned twice in Exodus 1, and both times in connection with the midwives who refused to kill the newborn males. The text says the midwives feared God (1:17) and that God was good to them (1:20). God is silent, but he is moving through people, particularly women. The text prominently features the two midwives, Moses' mother and sister, Pharaoh's daughter and the seven daughters of Reuel. In the epilogue, however, the text tells us that God is not silent.

The true Deliverer (2:23-25)

After "many" days, the king died. The text is clear that the affliction in Egypt was neither easy nor short. It was hard and long. God is honest. Our afflictions are often long and hard, and God is honest with us. He doesn't placate us with platitudes such as, "It's not that bad." It is bad, and he agrees with us.

In 1:6, it is reported that Joseph dies. By reporting the death of the king in 2:25, the text links all of Exodus 1 and 2. After this, the people cry out to God about their bondage. Up until now, there is no evidence that they did so. Sometimes, things have to get pretty bad before we cry out to God. We'll often try to think our way out instead of crying out.

At this point, God is the subject of four verbs: "heard," "remembered," "saw" and "took notice of." The text is artfully silent on God for two chapters. He's been working in quiet and unseen ways, but all along he's been waiting for his people to cry out to him. When they do, he is moved. He hears their cries. He remembers his promises to them, which go all the way back to his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He sees them. The verb "see" plays an important part in the entire chapter. Moses' mother saw that her child was beautiful (2:2). Pharaoh's daughter saw that the infant Moses was crying (2:6). Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew (2:11). All these afflictions are seen by different people. But it is God who sees them all. God "takes notice"

(*yada'*) of his people. This is the same word used in Exodus 1:8, where the text says that a new king rose over Egypt who did not "know" (*yada'*) Joseph. The king may not know Joseph and his descendants, but God does.

So what does God do with this knowledge? He prepares a deliverer.

The things of God

He wants to prepare us as well. We don't dwell on his deliverance of us in Christ, so we don't appreciate it. Then we rush things. We move ahead of God, seeking to establish ourselves inside our own vision for ourselves but outside God. We can't do what we want to do, but we can fail and run out of gas. When we give up, when hope seems lost, God surprises us. He reminds us that he hasn't given up on us. Then we're ready to learn the things of God. Then we're ready for dependence.

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