

# TURNING AWAY FROM THE WORLD

*SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH*

By Steve Zeisler

In my childhood I was fascinated with the images and tales of ancient Egypt: pyramids, treasure chambers, veiled queens, strange adventures, magic amulets, desert vistas, gold-trimmed boats on the great river. The lure of exotic Egypt has a long history. In the Biblical story, Egypt offers the preeminent alternative to trusting God.

We are studying in Hebrews 11 the experiences of faith of the saints of the Old Testament, which are recounted to inspire us in turn to be men and women of faith. In the last couple of messages (Discovery Papers 5244, 5245) we've been looking at the stories of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph. Hebrews 11 doesn't call attention to it, but you may remember that after Abraham had arrived in the Promised Land, his first failure was a journey to Egypt during a time of famine.

We talked a bit about Joseph in the last message. Joseph's story in Egypt began with his being a slave and a prisoner, and ended with his reaching the highest point of preeminence, the office of prime minister of Egypt. His entire family moved to Egypt during another famine, and ended up staying there for four hundred years. The birth of Israel as a nation came when the Israelites were set free from bondage in Egypt.

Moses' story, which we'll consider in this message, is in some ways the exact opposite of Joseph's. Joseph began his time in Egypt as a slave and became royalty; Moses began his life in Egypt as royalty and ended up choosing to live among slaves.

In brief, the world, pictured by Egypt in its glory, undermines our faith using both promises and threats. We'll see those in play in the text we're going to look at. Hebrews 11:23-26:

**By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.**

We're going to look at this text in three stages. Verses 23 and 24 each begin, "By faith Moses..." These describe two stages of Moses' story. By faith, when he was born, his parents took action because "they were not afraid of the king's edict." By faith, when he grew up, Moses himself took action, saying no to the pleasures of Egypt. And finally in verse 26 it says that Moses valued the reproach of Christ more than the riches of Egypt, and we'll consider this as the third stage.

Let's look at the first in verse 23.

## Standing up to fear

Moses' parents, having born a beautiful child, decided they would not fear the edict, or the command, of the king. As I mentioned, the children of Israel entered the land of Egypt when Joseph was prime minister, and they prospered. They were welcome in Egypt. But as they multiplied, they began to outperform their neighbors. The Egyptians grew afraid, and the Pharaohs decided to enslave this people that had come to live among them. Many generations later Moses was born.

The issue for us to consider is what it means to be "afraid of the king's edict." The king, or pharaoh, had required that all the male children born to Hebrew families be executed, again, in fear of their numeric superiority relative to the Egyptians. That strategy of executing children has, of course, Satanic staying power; recall Herod's edict when Jesus was born (Matthew 22).

But in this case, the parents of Moses refused to give in to the threat. They hid their child instead of giving him up. They were willing to suffer the consequences that would come to them for having disobeyed the king. They weren't afraid.

What makes us afraid, so that we are willing to sacrifice what is truly valuable and important? Try to put yourself in this statement: "I am being made to act in a way that contradicts what I believe because a voice of authority has made me afraid." Are you violating your conscience in some way? Are you dancing to a tune that you reject inwardly because you fear what will happen if you don't? The lesson of Moses' parents is that they chose not to act in fear.

Most of us are not afraid that the government is going to kill our children. We're not afraid of Nazis insisting that we turn in our Jewish neighbors or else suffer the consequences. But there are other threats we find overwhelming. Experts with academic credentials speak with power. Arbiters of what is cool require our children to dress and behave a certain way and value things that aren't valuable at all. Doorkeepers to wealth threaten to close the door on us if we don't obey them. A voice that speaks of what it takes to win the respect of our peers makes us want its reward more than we want what is right. We obey a command that we know is unreasonable, untrue, perhaps even deadly. "Hurry up or you'll miss out!" "Just one more act of selling out..." We look back at our life and see how many times we regret choices we've made, and yet we feel required to do the same thing again because we're afraid.

The context here is parenting. Moses' parents bore a child, and they refused to sacrifice their child out of fear. I believe parenting today is as difficult an experience as it has been at any time. I don't know very many parents who confidently view themselves as doing the assignment well. Most parents worry that they have not gotten it right. There's no possible way to keep up; there's always some new word from some expert as to some awful outcome. Many parents live with a very strong fear that it's not possible to do what they've been called to do.

Some react to what they're afraid of by overprotecting their children, who grow to young adulthood without ever facing a consequence, without learning from mistakes and discovering personal shortcomings in a way that brings maturity.

There are other parents whose fears go back to their own childhood. They remember being excluded from the cool group, and they don't want their children to be left out. "What if my child suffers the rejections I suffered?" I heard on the radio the other day parents debating how useful it is for twelve-year-old girls to wear thong underwear. How can there even be two opinions on that subject? The sexualizing of young girls, sometimes much younger than twelve, is one example of parents' letting inappropriate things happen because they are afraid not to. Sometimes parents put their children in environments at eight or nine years of age where they're made to feel like losers because they weren't chosen for the select team. These parents are trying to do the right thing, but they're afraid, and their fears may go back to what they remember about themselves when they were young.

The parents of Moses refused to sacrifice him out of fear. Parenting is an enormously difficult challenge today. Let me make another comment before we move on. What I'm *not* talking about is when you're not sure if a judgment call you've made is right, but as far as you can tell, it's the best choice. Rather, the concern being raised here is when you know something is wrong, when you're sure in your heart that the proposed choice is destructive, but you're too afraid to stand up to it. That's the time when you need to ask for God's help, and join with other people in asking for help. The first step is to face the threat and say, "I will not give in to what I'm afraid of and do what I know is wrong."

It says in Exodus 2:2, and it's quoted here, that Moses was a beautiful child. There are legends about Moses' childhood, about how extraordinary-looking he was as a child, so that people would make way for him as he walked down the street. But that's not the point that's being made. He was beautiful to his parents because he was their child. Your child is beautiful. In fact, your aging parents are beautiful. Your Christian friends are beautiful. Sometimes awareness of beauty can awaken us to say, "I'm not going to trash this out of fear." The children in our lives are beautiful, and they shouldn't be sacrificed because we're too fearful to stand up and speak or do what's right.

God can be trusted. We're not strong enough to get it right. In the long run we'll find ourselves bumping up against our inadequacies, perhaps sooner rather than later, depending on who we are. But what Moses' parents finally had to do was entrust their child to God and take their hands off. And God was faithful. The boy was protected and grew up and became who he was supposed to be.

Let's move on to the second issue.

## **Refusing empty promises**

Forty years later Moses was presented with a crisis: not a threat, but an offer, a promise bidding for his attention. The fork in the road that he faced was this: On the one hand, the opulence, arrogance, and power that came with being an Egyptian prince; on the other hand, the people to whom he had been born, who were slaves (who would end their slavery only by becoming desert wanderers for forty years). That was the stark divide in front of Moses.

The helpful thing in this text is how those concepts are described. It is the *fleeting* pleasures of the world, which don't last. What the world really has to offer is not true pleasure, but failed promises, glitz, and lies. And it's not just ill-treatment, but ill-treatment *with the people of God*. The Greek verb carries the idea of suffering ill-treatment with someone else; both ideas are contained in one word. It is being connected to people who are put in hard circumstances, and learning from a common life in difficulty, from solidarity in struggle.

A common caricature of Christians pictures the life of faith as devoid of fun. In fact, life in Christ is filled with wonders and glory and praise. Perhaps the surest evidence that the Holy Spirit is present in one's life is joy. Delight in life, goodness, wonder, thankfulness, and laughter—these things are fully Christian. What the world offers is only false pleasures, fleeting promises, empty enthusiasms, not the real thing.

Empty, fleeting pleasure and false enthusiasms never connect you to anybody. Because they fade, you have to hoard them to yourself. But joy, laughter, gratitude, and delight that come from God have the opposite quality, don't they? Godly delight is received as a gift. Grounded in gratitude, it overflows to the benefit of other people. You can enjoy godly pleasures almost as much remembering them as when you engaged in them. You want to share them with other people, they connect you to others. All capacity for physical pleasure, from sex to singing, is made by God. All beauty, delight, learning, joy in accomplishment, all the things that are really worth having, are made by God. But the world will offer us only glitz and glamour and eventual loss.

Moses had that option of pleasure and emptiness. The alternative was suffering ill-treatment in the company of the people of God. Most often the people you know best and care for most deeply are those with whom you have experienced hardship. Each of you needed to contribute, you needed to trust each other, face the unknown; and having done so, you've learned to value each other, because you've cared together about something bigger than yourselves. These folks are going to be part of your life, and you'll be part of theirs in times of need. And that's what Moses chose. He chose life together with the people of God, though it was filled with ill-treatment and suffering and loss.

## **Riches in Christ**

If the preceding observations are to be more than mere good advice, the phrase "considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" is crucial. In some sense, the writer of Hebrews is saying that Moses could see in the distance, in mystery, without detail, that a Savior was coming, and that Savior would lose his life. Moses ended up valuing that One rather than what the world had to offer.

Now, Moses didn't make this choice easily. He killed a man and ran away, and lived a long time in the wilderness. Peter first denied Christ in his reproach (Matthew 26:57-75; Mark 14:53-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:12-27) and later preached the gospel that centered on the cross (1 Peter). Jesus' willingness to take our failures and suffering on himself frees us from the broken world we have created for ourselves.

We are not capable of saying no to fear, of refusing temptation, unless we receive strength to do so from Christ. His humiliation makes the gift possible. Because he went through that, he helps broken people like us to be forgiven, and strengthens needy people like us for the purposes of God.

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