

SEEING THE UNSEEN GOD

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

The quality of human life has been bolstered by the discovery of bacteria. Boiling water and washing food have done an immeasurable amount of good, breaking the power of diseases caused by life forms too small to be seen with the naked eye. It is important to take such invisible realities seriously.

How much more seriously should we take the power and presence of God? He is majestic, yet unseen. It is by faith that we apprehend God as he is. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1.)

We are midway through Hebrews 11, which is a great encouragement to faith as it retells the stories of men and women who have gone before us. The letter to the Hebrews was written to a discouraged community. The recipients had begun well, served Christ with a full heart, and suffered for their faith. Yet as time went by they grew discouraged, weary of doing good.

The author draws the analogy of a distance runner who has hit a wall. He has run well, has been faithful, but now it’s too hard to keep going. Will he finish the race? The race analogy is made plain at the beginning of chapter 12 when the writer says finally, “Let us run with endurance...fixing our eyes on Jesus...” But in drawing the analogy of a race, he also imagines a multitude of cheering fans. In Roman times, spectators wore white robes to the arena to watch the games—appearing as a cloud to the runner who looks up at them. Having finished their own race, these observers voice encouragement for those who are in the arena before them. Calling them witnesses, or onlookers, the author picks out certain individuals: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and others. Their stories encourage us who are running the race now.

We began considering Moses’ story in the previous message (Discovery Paper 5246). It is somewhat different from those of most of the folks previously mentioned in Hebrews 11, who believed God for things he had not yet done. We were told Abraham lived in tents, waiting for a city being prepared for him.

But Moses’ world was different. He lived in a time when the plan of God seemed to have failed, when the people of God were living in bondage, weak and defeated. He and those like him were asking, “How can God’s truth be life-giving in circumstances in which we seem to have lost our way? We once resided in the Promised Land, but now we are now slaves in Egypt. Things have gone wrong.” Moses’ story is not so much about promises that are future to us, but about struggles we have now.

In verses 23-26 we observed that Moses made a significant decision. Remember, Moses was born to Hebrew parents who nourished him as a young child, so he knew his Hebrew identity. But he was raised as an Egyptian, a son of Pharaoh’s daughter. As an adult he had two identities, two worlds to which he could belong, two possibilities. And finally the day came when the Spirit of God said to Moses that he had to choose whom he would serve. He couldn’t continue with

two identities. Jesus has said that by the Spirit of God to each of us at some point as well. “Make a choice. Follow me. There’s a broad road and a narrow road. You can’t go down both roads. Now is the time to declare who you will be.” Verse 25 said that Moses chose to suffer with the people of God rather than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. He chose the presence of God and the plan of God.

Leaving Egypt

Verse 27:

By faith he [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

The translation “He left Egypt” is inadequate. The Greek phrase is actually much better translated “He abandoned Egypt” or “He forsook Egypt.” It has a finality, a firmness, to it. He disentangled himself from Egypt, severed his ties, ended that chapter of his life.

Moses’ experience can teach us how to resist the influence of the world. In our case, having made a public commitment to Jesus, how do we disentangle ourselves from all the other claims on our lives? We have the world outside of us with all its pressures, and we have “world-shaped” emotions and thoughts within. How can we choose to follow Christ?

There’s an old song that says, “I have decided to follow Jesus... no turning back.” But many of us easily turn back. So we make the decision again. “This time I mean it, Lord. This time I’ll follow you for sure.” Some time goes by and we feel as if we’ve wandered away again, and we say again, “This time that I hear your call on me, Lord, I’ll be faithful.” And yet Egypt lays claim to us again and again. How does a believer change? How do we leave behind the world with its threats and its allures?

That is the instruction we’re given in this text. Moses’ leaving Egypt is an extended story. In fact, he left it in two stages. He left once in fear, and he left later as a national leader. The process of setting behind him the power and pressure of the world was a difficult business, and it took him a long time to accomplish.

The key to leaving the world behind is in the phrase at the end of verse 27: “Seeing Him who is unseen.” It is a new, clearer, deeper, more compelling vision of God that changes everything. Let’s read the remainder of Moses’ story. Our text is Hebrews 11:27-29:

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

The first time Moses left Egypt, he left alone, running for his life. The phrase in verse 27, “not fearing the wrath of the king,” is ironic, because at that point he was not forsaking Egypt, he was running from it, under threat as a criminal (Exodus 2:11-15).

But the second stage of his leaving Egypt was in the Exodus, described here, when he left as the head of a nation, with the people of God behind him, by miracles of God’s deliverance. Both the Egyptians and the Israelites “saw him who is unseen” in the dramatic acts of power that led to the Exodus. And a new clarity about God’s love and strength is the means by which our lives change so that we are not the people we used to be.

Let’s examine the two stages of Moses’ leaving.

God speaks to us

After Moses chose to cast his lot with the children of Israel, his initial step was an act of violence. I think we need to imagine Moses as proud. “Now that I have chosen to serve God, I am going to use all of the gifts, abilities, training, and standing I have to throw off the yoke of Egypt from my people. They will rise up and follow me, and we will show Egypt what’s what.” He killed an Egyptian slave-master, and he imagined that the Hebrews would follow him immediately. But they ridiculed him. “Who do you think you are?” Moses had alienated both the Egyptians and the Hebrews. Having chosen to identify with the people of God, but with nothing to show for it, he ran away to Midian (Exodus 2:11-15).

The man who once lived in the royal palace of Egypt was now a nomad. Exodus 3:1 says he lived on the west side of the wilderness, which might as well have been the back side of the moon. Once he had been a nobleman in Egypt, but now he was a keeper of sheep—alone and lost.

It was in the midst of this loneliness that he encountered God, who spoke to him from a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4:17). He heard God speak to him, and in the course of that conversation Moses began to lay out his inadequacies. “Who am I? The failed Egyptian prince, a criminal running for my life, a lost nomad belonging nowhere. Who am I, with my speech impediment and my blunders?” God answered him, but he didn’t say, “Moses, let me teach you to think of yourself differently. You have a lot of good qualities.” Rather, God’s answer to Moses, once proud but now broken, lost, lonely, and purposeless, was to speak of himself: “I am the God who made a covenant with your fathers. I keep my promises.” Moses’ questions were answered by God’s self-disclosure.

So as Moses struggled to act on truth, the truth was made plainer and plainer to him, and he eventually became a different man, neither proud nor broken, but a man of faith whose world changed because he had seen God.

(I recommend Scott Grant’s excellent study on Exodus 3, *Being Involved* [1]. It gives a fuller explanation of Moses’ encounter with God in the wilderness.)

I don't keep a blog or journal. But I realize I have a rich interior blog. I think about myself all the time. I tell my story to myself. Sometimes I'm heroic, sometimes pitiful, sometimes bitter, sometimes magnanimous. What makes it difficult for most of us to see God is what we're looking at instead. When Moses was in the presence of God he spoke about himself. He trotted out all his excuses, his difficulties, why life shouldn't have turned out this way, his unhappiness. It's hard for any of us to see God, when we have mirrors arranged so that we can see and reflect on ourselves, feel sorry for or proud of whatever it is about us that captivates us so much. In order to get over our fear, to leave Egypt behind, we need to set aside our self-discussion and be willing to give attention to God.

After Moses had spent forty years in isolation, wondering and wandering, God sent him back again in order to leave Egypt for good. God sent him back to Egypt so that he could forsake Egypt.

Seeing God's miracles

Previously, Egypt was alluring to Moses. The writer of Hebrews highlights the pleasures of sin in Egypt. When he lived there as a son of Pharaoh's daughter, the bright lights of Egypt, the power and the allure of its wealth, were compelling.

But now he saw Egypt as cruel and decayed, facing divine judgment. Moses, speaking for God, demanded the release of the Israelites, and declared a series of plagues to break Pharaoh's resistance. References to darkness are everywhere in the account of Moses before Pharaoh. There were ten plagues—the ninth was a season of darkness that descended on the land and lasted for days without relief. The firstborn died, the slaves marched free, and the armies of Egypt drowned at night, in the dark.

I don't know how close our civilization is to ending its run in defiance of God, how close our world is to judgment. It could be soon. It's clear that there is despair everywhere in the culture we live in. It's clear that God is given little regard, and that greed is being championed in the world. It's clear that violence has become a first course rather than last course in many places, that lawlessness around the globe is rising, that immorality is commonplace.

Despair and decay had claimed the hearts of the Israelite slaves, and Moses called on them to hope in the promises of God. There are miracles taking place in our world as well, and we must choose to see them. We must see marriages reconciled for Christ's sake as a beautiful testimony that he is here with us. We've got to see that people who get involved with the hurting in the world around us, who make choices to live differently, are evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We need to be able to see even in a decaying world that God is still acting redemptively. And then seeing God, we will be able to choose to leave Egypt behind, to live differently, to be surer of God's love and presence and strength than we are of the decay and brokenness that seeps into our experience from the world we live in.

I graduated from high school in 1967. It's now forty years later, and there are forty-year reunions being planned at the two high schools I attended, one in Arizona and one in Southern California. I've been getting emails, and there are websites. The stories of the class of '67 are being told,

and people are finding old friends—people I haven't thought of for years. Some of them give clear evidence of their faith in Christ, their awareness that God has made himself known to them in a powerful way. With other people there isn't enough information to tell.

Forty years. That's how long Moses spent in the wilderness. After escaping Egypt, the children of Israel wandered for forty years before they entered the Promised Land. Forty years is enough time to draw some conclusions. I've been asking myself what evidence there is in more than forty years of my knowing the Lord that I see him more clearly, that I'm persuaded of his strength and faithfulness and love, even in the darkness.

That's how a change of any kind that is valuable and worthy takes place. As our vision of God becomes greater, we find ourselves able to forsake Egypt. We're no longer afraid, no longer captivated by Egypt, because we see the One who is unseen.

Notes

1. Scott Grant, *Being Involved*, © 1995. Available at www.pbc.org/files/messages/10403/exo003.html: internet.

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