

This led to the third significant factor in the story; they prayed. Initially, all the text says is that they 'called out' (2:23) with 'groaning' (2:24), and it is unclear whether they had any clear understanding of to whom their cries were addressed. Scripture does not say 'they cried out to God'; however, God was listening simply because he was their Covenant God who always kept Covenant faithfulness whether His people did or not.

God's 'calling to mind' (2:24) of His people is the fourth feature of the story. In some translations of the Bible, it says that God 'remembered' His people, but this hides the fact that the Hebrew word used here implies that God was not merely thinking about His people, but preparing for action. The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were filled with God's action to achieve His purposes, and the mention of them in this text tells us that it was God's intention to intervene in history once again.

Finally, in verse 25, the Hebrew sentence is strangely truncated, saying quite literally 'God saw the people of Israel and He knew ...' We do not know whether this was part of a longer sentence, but as it stands, it really does give us a strong impression that God understood what was happening to his people, with a deep and sympathetic understanding. It was time for Him to act, as we shall see tomorrow.

Application

The story of Moses' discovery of the family of Reuel is one of the incidents which happen to people which God uses for their blessing. Such things can happen to us if we are ready to open our eyes and see them as such. It is probably true that God is constantly involved in the circumstances of our lives, working for good even though we cannot see it. However, it is wonderful when we are able to appreciate what He is doing. Moses probably felt very blessed by the favourable welcome he had from Reuel for without it, he would have been homeless and without a family. We too are blessed when we are able to see God's hand in what happens around us.

The last three verses of our passage explain how it is that God's people reach a place of true need and dependency upon God, and it has much to teach us. There are similarities in the pattern of events described in this study to the social and religious conditions which led to significant revival and renewal at the time of Luther and Wesley, for example, though space does not allow me to explain this in more detail. Many people pray for revival today, and it is important that we do; but God's work will come when He is ready and when He has His leaders prepared and ready to do His will, in response to the cries of the people. We are now living in New Testament times, and the work of the Kingdom never ceases, but there are times and seasons when God acts to bring about great and world changing renewal. We pray, and wait on Him for this.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What similarities can you find with the story of Isaac (Gen 24) and Jacob (Gen 29)? How do these help our understanding of this passage?
2. Discuss the meaning of Moses' son's name, and in what ways it described Moses' personal situation.
3. How do verses 23 to 25 describe the church today, if at all?

Discipleship

Do you believe in coincidences? It is common to hear people in church say 'No!' However, we are even more blessed when people share testimony about how God has worked in their lives in ways that may seem insignificant at the time, but later prove to be important. These are real testimonies of faith. As an exercise in discipleship, use a sheet of paper or a diary over a week to write down the particular things which you can clearly identify as God's work in your life. At the end of the week, spend time reflecting on what God has done for you.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father; come into my life and do those miracles of grace by which I may know Your hand is guiding my life and leading me in the right direction. And if I am not 'right' with You, please bring me to a place of repentance where I can be set free, and therefore find this glorious liberty: AMEN

Prayer

Love and care, Lord Jesus, is what we need. We praise You for showing us this in Your life, and in Your death, resurrection and ascension. Send us Your Spirit now, so that we may both experience this love and care directly, and also minister it to others in Your name. Take away our fear of what You might do, and grant us glory in Your power! Thank You Jesus, AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Searching the soul

Each of us harbours difficult thoughts and feelings about others, sometimes they are people who are close to us, such as loved ones or friends. It is normal for us to have to cope with such trials and distress, and it is frequently very personal. Examine yourself before God and check out that you have offered all such issues to the Lord, and have sought His will for each situation.

Meditation

Would you choose to set aside your whole life,
Risking all for Christ in unfettered discipleship?
Letting go of all the things that have defined you;
Money, property, friends, memories and status?

Would you choose to leave the past behind;
Not by ignoring it or casting it adrift, but launching out,
And pressing on beyond the social boundaries of your day;
Leaping on ahead because you know what's gone before?

Would you choose to defy this disillusioned world,
By confounding the sceptics and making tomorrow's news;
Creating the history of our world by being one step ahead
Of its many cultures, through the quality of your discipleship?

Would you stand with your head and shoulders
High above this so-called 'post-modern' world,
Because the standard you bear without shame or fear
Is the unmistakable and empty Cross of Jesus Christ?

Would you take the suffering and the glory of this Cross,
And live by it before all, as a true disciple of Jesus Christ?

If this is where your heart is, then something has to change ... Now.

Bible Study - Exodus 2:16-25

¹⁶ The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water and fill the water troughs in order to water their father's flock; ¹⁷ but some shepherds came and drove them away, so Moses came to their defence and watered their flock. ¹⁸ When they returned to their father, Reuel, he said, 'Why have you been able to return so quickly today?' ¹⁹ They replied, 'An Egyptian man rescued us from the shepherds, and even drew water for us and watered the flock.' ²⁰ 'Where is he?' he said to his daughters, 'Why did you leave the man? Invite him to come and have something to eat.' ²¹ Then Moses agreed to live with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage. ²² She bore a son, and Moses named him Gershom; as he said, 'I have become a stranger in a foreign land.'

²³ After a long time, the king of Egypt died, but the people of Israel groaned under the weight of their slavery, and called out. Their cry for deliverance from bondage went up to God, ²⁴ and He heard their groaning and called to mind his Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel, and understood.

Review

This is not the first story in the Bible in which a great servant of God experiences testing after being thrown out of his home, finding himself beside a well and meeting a woman who would one day become his wife! Jacob had experienced this after deceiving his brother and father (Genesis 28,29). The incidents happened at low points in the lives of both Jacob and Moses, and prior to mighty acts of God which, for each of them, changed them forever. In the case of Jacob, God had to change his character over many years before he could return to the Promised Land. In the case of Moses, God would appear to him after an even longer period of time (Ex 7:7) to reveal Himself and commission Moses to lead the people of Israel back again into the Promised Land. There are many differences between the stories of Jacob and Moses, but the similarities are too close to be ignored.

If Moses knew something of the heritage of his own people, he would have known it through the telling of the stories of the forefathers, and he may therefore have been aware of the connections between what happened to him and what happened to Jacob. The general scene was typical of the Middle East, as shepherds and nomadic families competed for scarce water resources, with women coming to the wells to water flocks; there is ample evidence even to this day that this was an ancient tradition. It is possible that Moses would have recognised, either at the time or some time later, that the scenario itself was an indicator of the presence of God; and just as Jacob had found the love of his life in such circumstances, so did Moses, who was rewarded for his heroics by marriage to Zipporah (2:21). Neither he nor Jacob knew what God's ultimate plans for them would be at the time of these incidents, but each event indicated that God had not forgotten them, and their wait upon the Lord was not in vain.

Moses was still recognisable as an Egyptian (2:19), perhaps by his haircut or by his clothes; a detail which indicates the haste with which he made his decision to embrace his Hebrew ancestry and leave Egypt. Having settled by a well (2:15), Moses saw local shepherds obstructing the efforts of local women to draw water. He intervened and rescued the women, watering their flock, apparently with no ulterior motive or attraction to the women. Their father, Reuel, 2:18, was surprised that his daughters came home early; and they told him what had happened. He then invited Moses to eat with him according to nomadic custom (2:20). Moses decided to settle with Reuel after his marriage to Zipporah, and the birth of their first child 'Gershom'. The story is simple, but there are a considerable number of interesting features. For example, this is only place where we come across the man named of 'Reuel' in Scripture, but we meet Moses' 'father-in-law' elsewhere but with another name; you will probably know him as 'Jethro' (3:1)! The main study will look at this and other details, later on.

Perhaps the most significant part of this reading is found at the end (2:23-25). The people of Israel hoped that a change of leader would bring changes which might benefit them (just as we do today!). However, when the old Pharaoh who had begun their oppression died, his successor was no different, and their cruel suffering continued. The people then began to pray in the midst of their distress, which was a trigger for God to act and help His Covenant people (2:24,25). If we uphold the traditional view that Moses was the original author behind much of what we now read in Exodus, then we must see these verses as something more than mere comment, but information known to Moses. He was awaiting the right time to act, and waiting on God. Very slowly, God was drawing together both His chosen leader and His people in their state of need. It was not a case of God 'remembering' His people (as verse 24 reads in many translations), but of responding to their readiness to be saved. God had His deliverer waiting and ready to act; but there was still one crucial thing the Lord had to do for Moses, as we shall read tomorrow.

Going Deeper

There are many things yet to discover in this passage. What did it mean for Reuel to be called a 'priest'? Was Zipporah as important to Moses as the great matriarchs of Genesis, Rebecca and Rachel? Was there any meaning in the name of Moses' son? Why did God not act sooner to help His people in their slavery? We will start by looking further at the 'priest of Midian'.

Moses meets the priest of Midian and his daughters

As we saw in yesterday's study, Midian was a natural place for Moses to go when he fled Egypt. The desert regions of the Sinai Peninsula were inhabited by Midianite people who were

descended from Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen 25:1f.) Although they were not included in the general descent of God's Covenant people, their religious beliefs were likely to be similar to that of Abraham. There is also evidence in Genesis that there were people in this part of the world who God used as 'priests' (see the priest Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18 and Hebrews 5,7). Certainly, if the 'Reuel' in this passage is the same as the 'Jethro' (Moses' father-in-law) in the rest of Exodus, and we have no good reason to doubt it, then this man became an important friend, father-figure and confidant to Moses in critical periods of the experience of the Exodus and wandering through the wilderness (Ex 18:1f.). Reuel provided Moses with a ministry in the same way that Melchizedek did for Abraham (Gen 14), so there is no reason for us to think of him as a 'pagan' priest (as some commentators do).

It was also possible that Moses himself knew the Midianite regions of the Sinai. Records from that era in Egyptian life indicate that significant numbers of Egyptians traders, craftsmen, ambassadors and soldiers travelled west and north from the northern tip of Egypt to engage in trade with other parts of the Middle Eastern world with some regularity and freedom; probably far more so than we would expect. Moses was a well trained court 'prince' from Egypt, who absconded at the age of forty; old enough to have experienced more than simply the luxuries of living in Egypt. All this may well explain why the daughters of Reuel recognised an Egyptian and could converse with him; and Moses with them. And if Moses was spiritually becoming aware of his own heritage, then the Midianites provided a small traditional connection with his own past. All of this would be important.

There is a great deal of speculation in the various commentaries written on Exodus about Reuel. His name could mean 'friend of God', but there is no doubt that he must be the same man named 'Jethro' in Exodus 3:1. The name Reuel only appears elsewhere in the Old Testament as the name of one or two other unconnected individuals, and also as Moses' father-in-law in Numbers 10:29; also, the name Jethro only appears in Exodus (3:1, 4:18, 18:1f.). Some believe that one name, perhaps Reuel, is a clan name, and Jethro is a personal name; but we could equally suggest the names might be the other way round! It is hardly a problem, as there are plenty of places in the Old Testament where people have more than one name (for example, see Gideon, also known as 'Jerubbaal' – Judges 6:32, 7:1, 8:29f.)

The other names of people mentioned in this passage are Moses' wife and his first son, Zipporah and Gershom. In comparison to the great matriarchal figures of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah in Genesis, Zipporah is lightweight! Her name is difficult to interpret, but may mean 'twittering' (like bird song!) and apart from one incident (4:25), she does not play an important part in the story of the Exodus. There is more confusion about the name of Moses' son, named Gershom. The same name, sometimes spelt 'Gershom' and sometimes 'Gershon' is elsewhere used to describe the son of Levi (Gen 46:11, 1 Chron 6:1f. etc), but we hear little more in Scripture of Gershom as the son of Moses.

Looking at these names does not therefore appear to get us anywhere, but the fact that these names are relatively insignificant is interesting in itself. It reminds us that the focus of the story of God's work is now exclusively on Moses as the leader of God's people. This is the perspective which the Scriptures focus in upon relentlessly, and although Moses has only just been introduced to us, the message is very clear. This is the man God will use to rescue His people; he, and no-one else. The story of Genesis was about the growth of God's family. The story of Exodus is about deliverance from slavery and the leadership God used to bring about that deliverance.

The groaning of the people of Israel

Verses 23 to 25 are a clear example of the dependency of God's people upon their Creator and Saviour. Firstly, the circumstances had to be right for God to act to save them. The phrase 'the king of Egypt died' is not in this passage just to tell us that Israel's slavery continued (as it did); it is there to let us know that Moses was no longer a wanted man. Moses had rebelled against the previous king and he was now in a position to go back to Egypt without being hounded. This was essential to God's plan, though it was not possible for him to see this at the time.

Secondly, the people of Israel were depressed by their continuing enslavement. It is possible that they had hoped to find their conditions eased by a new king with different ambitions, but sadly disappointed, they knew that many more years of slavery lay ahead, and instead of hoping for relief from the natural human circumstances of life, they needed it from God alone.