

ONE

Life in the Penalty Box

(Read Exodus 2)

One day I received this letter:

I am a man thirty-one years old and divorced, though I fought the divorce bitterly.

I feel bad because I have no hope for the future; often I go home from church and cry. But there is no one to hold me when I cry. No one cares. What hurts most is that I've begged God for the grace to be single for His glory and to fix my eyes on Jesus, but nothing changes. I continue to fail.

I am a basket case emotionally, or on the verge of collapse. Something is very wrong. I'm so crippled and embittered that I can scarcely relate to others anymore. *I feel I have to sit out the rest of my life in the penalty box.*

The penalty box—have you been there? You want to get closer to God, but He seems to hide His face. You are trying to find some purpose in your pain but there are few (if any) answers. The more you try to read the fine print of God's will the more mysterious it becomes.

Maybe it's a result of a bankruptcy you couldn't avoid, an ugly habit that brought health problems, or a past immoral relationship that keeps getting in the way of your genuine desire to make things right. Or perhaps you were unjustly fired

from your job. Whatever the cause, you feel as if you are in the penalty box, much like a hockey player who has to be out of the game for a rule infraction or flagrant misconduct.

You've got a friend in Moses. He spent forty years in Pharaoh's court, another forty leading the Israelites out of Egypt, but sandwiched in between he spent another forty years in the penalty box for manslaughter. What he didn't know was that this was to be his training ground for greater things. He would eventually get close to God, but it would take awhile.

Stephen tells us in Acts 7 that Moses "was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds" (v. 22). He had studied mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry, as well as hieroglyphics. The son of Pharaoh's daughter, he enjoyed celebrity status and had every luxury Egypt could offer. F.B. Meyer speculates, that "If he rode forth into the streets, it would be in a princely equipage, amid the cries of, 'Bow the knee.' If he floated on the Nile, it would be in a golden barge, amid the strains of voluptuous music" (*Moses* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan], 21).

Josephus says that when the Ethiopians successfully invaded Egypt, Moses was put in charge of the royal troops. He defeated the enemy and returned with spoils of victory. As Meyer says, the cream of Egypt was poured into his cup.

Yet, although Moses was educated as an Egyptian, he remained an Israelite in his heart. Grief gripped him when he saw his people making bricks in the hot sun. This child of luxury and fashion could have stayed in the palace, but he chose to take long walks to inspect what was happening out in the fields. The mistreatment of his people made him deeply angry.

He knew he was called to be their deliverer. His mother had shared with him how God had preserved him in a basket along

the Nile. What is more, he felt the compulsion of leadership. He could not rid himself of the impression that his destiny did not lie in the palace but in taking the risk of freeing his people. The special privileges he had were not to be wasted. He was a man of destiny.

Moses might have simply used his influence to convince Pharaoh to lighten up on his persecution of the Hebrews. He might have reasoned that he could do more for them if he stayed in the palace than if he went with them into the fields. But his heart was pulsating with the burning desire to throw his lot in with them—body, soul, and spirit. “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” (Heb 11:24-26).

Only in recent years have archeologists unearthed the buried treasures of Egypt; now we are better able to understand the wealth and luxury that Moses left behind: piles of gold, art treasures, and jewels of every description. To leave the palace and opt for the fields was an incredible sacrifice. He was willing to relinquish respect and honor for contempt and hatred.

His decision was made when the pleasures of sin seemed most alluring. He had grown up surrounded by the indulgences of Pharaoh, who by now was probably Thutmose III. Moses knew all this could already be his, and there was more to come when he came into his inheritance. If he had waited to ascend the throne, he would have become the chief Egyptian god, enjoying the worship of the nation. The lap of luxury beckoned him. Resolutely, Moses said no to everything

the average person would have said yes to.

One day as he walked in the fields and saw the sun-blackened bodies working hurriedly to make bricks, he saw an Egyptian whipping an Israelite. This was too much; the time for swift action had arrived. As Don Baker put it, “Moses forgot that he was Moses. He forgot that he was the prince of Egypt, the Pharaoh-elect, the yet-to-be-appointed king. In a moment of unbridled rage he struck the unsuspecting Egyptian and then wrapped his strong right arm around the overseer’s neck” (*The God of Second Chances* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991], 33). As the man’s lifeless body slumped to the ground, Moses knew he had killed a man. He hid the warm but lifeless corpse in the sand (Ex 2:12).

The next day he went out to settle a quarrel among two Israelites only to have the offender say to him, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” (v. 14). Moses was surprised that someone had been watching the whole ordeal. Though he had scanned the horizon carefully, apparently he wasn’t careful enough. Or else he hadn’t covered the corpse with enough sand. God, of course, was also watching.

What hurt most deeply is that his own people had rejected him. Stephen comments, “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand” (Acts 7:25). He had *supposed* his people would understand! This was an unfortunate assumption. As hundreds of people who have failed in life have had to learn, it’s often presumptuous to suppose that God’s people will understand.

Pharaoh felt betrayed by the one who had grown up under his tutelage, so he wanted Moses dead. The Israelites would

likely not have protected Moses even if they could have, so he had few options. In order to save his life, he fled to the desert.

To be hated by Pharaoh was understandable, but to be rejected by the people he had risked his life to help caused a wound that would take years to heal. He felt betrayed by his own people; worse, he undoubtedly also felt betrayed by the God whom he thought would bless him for his willingness to risk all he had for the sake of his people.

“By faith Moses ... refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,” the author of Hebrews tells us. He had gone in faith to help his people, believing that God would vindicate his heroic decision. But though he did what he thought God wanted, he was brought to failure and humiliation. Either he had misread God’s will or God simply was not worthy of his trust.

When he got to Midian Moses was exhausted, so he sat down beside a well. He had a box of medals; he was qualified to be the king of Egypt, but back home his reputation was forever ruined. Undoubtedly, Pharaoh let the people know that his adopted son had become a traitor.

Why had all this happened to Moses?

In the desert Moses would have time to heal. He would also have time to get to know God. Though he did not understand why his attempt at obedience had backfired, he would eventually be confronted by the God whose will now seemed so obscure. God would become Moses’ teacher. Hidden away from the trappings of luxury and power, Moses would be slowly remade. His heart would be prepared for knowing the Almighty and eventually he would get closer to Him than any other man on earth ever could.

God would use the desert to teach Moses what the palace

could never have taught him. He got his education in the court of the king, but wisdom and character would be formed in the desert. What God would do *in* Moses while he waited would be just as important as what He would do *through* Moses when he acted.

What to Moses seemed to be the end of a meaningful life would actually be the beginning of one of the most celebrated careers in history. In the desert he would eventually be confronted by the God of his fathers. He would meet the “God of the Second Chance.”

What lessons did Moses learn in the desert that he could not have learned in the palace?

The Lesson of Servanthood

Moses probably had never helped water sheep before, but that day, sitting under the blistering desert sun, he had his first opportunity to really serve. When the daughters of the priest of Midian came to the well, Moses protected them from rough shepherds and helped them draw water (Ex 2:16-17). Though he had been trained for more prestigious responsibilities, he did whatever he could to help. The change was beginning to happen.

When Reuel, the father of the young women, asked who had helped them, they knew only that they had met an Egyptian. “An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds; and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock” (v. 19). They had no idea that they were in the presence of greatness. The man who had instant recognition in Egypt had now withdrawn to live in obscurity and

humiliation. He was invited to Reuel's home and married Zipporah, one of the man's daughters. And from then on he was a shepherd.

Moses was now miles from Egypt socially as well as geographically. Shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians. For forty years he did what he had formerly been taught to despise. Now this prestigious child of fame and fortune would waste his life doing what the most unlettered slave could do. He never did feel at home in the desert; he was like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. His aptitude lay in one direction, his responsibilities in another. His training appeared wasted. When his wife bore him a son, they named him Gershom, which means foreigner (v. 22). He would always think of himself as an alien, a man without a country.

As far as Moses was concerned, he expected to stay in the penalty box in Midian for the rest of his life. No one would ever be impressed with his credentials; he had nothing to do but contemplate his mistake and reflect on how badly he had been treated. In the backside of the desert, nobody cared. There were no promotions. At best he would graduate from one flock of sheep to another.

During those heady days in Egypt, mothers had undoubtedly pointed to Moses and said to their sons, "There's Moses ... be like him!" But here, no one admired his education or leadership. He knew that back in Egypt stories about his life in the palace would be erased from the Egyptian records. He was doomed to obscurity. The boredom of it all took its toll.

Though we can't say for sure, Moses likely began to spend more time with God. He might well have been put off by the mysterious ways of the Almighty, but he was intrigued by the thought that God did have a purpose for his nation, the cho-

sen sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had time to remember, time to reflect, and time to pray.

Francis Schaeffer said that there are no big people and no little people as far as God is concerned, only consecrated and unconsecrated people. That's why our vocation isn't as important to God as it is to us. Moses had to learn that there can be fulfillment even in obscurity. Yes, even when we are asked to do a job for which we are not suited, it can have meaning if we do it for God.

Time goes more quickly when we serve with a right attitude! When Jacob went to work for Laban, he agreed to serve seven years for Rachel. The text says, "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (Gn 29:20). The speed with which time moves depends on the person with whom it is spent.

Servanthood is best learned in the desert. It happens when we are asked to do those things for which we are overqualified. Moses had to learn it's not *what* you do but *why* you do it that matters to God. God wants our hearts, not just our hands.

Though Moses still felt far from God, his heart was opening to the possibility of knowing the Almighty. With nothing to see east, west, north, and south, he found himself looking upward. Perhaps he was beginning to realize that he was closer to God as a servant in the desert than he would have been as a ruler in the palace.

The Lesson of Trust

Moses had to learn that God is working even when He is silent, even when we cannot detect His movements. "Now it came

about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God” (Ex 2:23). In the course of many days, God began to work—14,600 days to be precise! It took forty years, but God began to answer His people’s prayer.

We read, “So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them” (vv. 24-25).

Three verbs describe what God was doing while Moses was going nowhere in the desert. God *heard* the groaning of His people. He wasn’t deaf after all. Though He didn’t respond to His people’s cries immediately, He was listening.

Next, God *remembered* His covenant. Though we may forget promises or even fail to deliver on those we remember, God is never careless with His commitments. For Him time does not erase details; everything is fresh in His memory. He remembers a thousand years ago with the same clarity that He remembers yesterday.

One reason why we can forget the injustices done against us is because God remembers them—and since He is the judge, there is really no reason for us to have to remember them too! Moses was learning that even when life is slow and God is silent, He is moving events along according to His timetable.

God also *saw* the needs of His people. He felt their hurts. Their ways were not hidden from Him, though deliverance was long in coming. For the moment, Moses had to learn to trust God even when He appeared to be indifferent regarding the needs of His people.

Of course, it’s easy to trust God when the bush is burning,

the waters are parting, and the mountains are shaking—it's those silent years that are discouraging. But *blessed is the person who does not interpret the silence of God as the indifference of God!*

Yes, it's easy to talk about faith when you're healthy and the boss has just promoted you. When you are happy with your work and your children are following the Lord, trust comes easily. But when you've been misunderstood, misrepresented, and when you're in a job that is not suited to your abilities or training—when you've got medical bills, and an impossible marriage partner—that's when trust means most to God. *It's in the desert and not in the palace that God finds out the depths of our yieldedness.* It's when He is silent, not when He speaks, that our faith is precious in His sight.

Moses was learning that we can draw near to God even when He is silent. Faith opens the door to His presence.

The Lesson of Obedience

As we shall see in the next chapter, God came to Moses in the burning bush with an invitation to be a leader, a powerful man back in Egypt again. The time had come to get out of the penalty box and back into the game. But Moses objected, saying, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11).

Moses was a different man. Forty years before, he had thought he could pull off the Exodus in his own strength, but now he had learned his lesson. We might expect him to say to God, "Where have *You* been? I've been just waiting to return to Egypt!" But he asked the question that anyone who has

been broken by God would ask: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

And yet we will learn in the next chapter that Moses’ question was not so much motivated by humility as it was by a stubborn refusal to say yes to the divine call. He had not forgotten what had happened in Egypt forty years ago. He was still hurting, and besides, he now had a wife and family. Returning to Egypt at this stage of his life was not a simple matter.

The desert experience convinced Moses that he could not be a leader of his people on his own, but it did not yet bring him to the point of complete surrender. Perhaps Moses even preferred by now that his people would rot in Egypt! When you’re in the penalty box, it’s easy to become bitter, determined to never get back into the game. Moses did not want to be hurt a second time, so he asked, “What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say? For they may say, ‘The Lord has not appeared to you’” (4:1). How did God answer this objection? He asked, “‘What is that in your hand?’ And he said, ‘A staff’” (v. 2). Then God empowered Moses to do special miracles with it. When he threw it on the ground, it became a serpent; but when he stretched out his hand and caught its tail, it was transformed back into a staff. And when he put his hand in his bosom and pulled it out it was leprous, white as snow. But when he put it back in his bosom, it was restored.

Where did Moses get this staff, this rod with which he would do miracles? He got it when he was serving in the penalty box. Later he would stretch out his rod over the sea and the waters would part. That stout piece of wood, about five feet long, would be a constant reminder to Moses that God would be with him all the way. From then on, Moses carried

this rod with him and it was used by God in defeating the Egyptians. The rod of Moses became the rod of God.

A.W. Tozer has said that the best leaders are not those who want the job but those who are conscripted by God for leadership. If Moses had a hankering for greatness, it was laid to rest in the desert. Now in the presence of the Lord he struggled, unsure of his own gifts and abilities. Yet for all of his doubts and reluctance he was at last qualified for leadership. God found it easier to use a faltering man with doubts than an eager man brimming with independence and self-will.

Moses learned, as all of us must, that we draw closer to God only because God takes the initiative to come to us. “How blessed is the one whom Thou dost choose, and bring near to Thee, to dwell in Thy courts; we will be satisfied with the goodness of Thy house, Thy holy temple” (Ps 65:4). As the work became harder, Moses would have to draw nearer. He would eventually know God in ways that no other man would.

You and Your Desert

Today, God asks you and me, “What is in *your* hand? What have you learned while on the sidelines?” Patience? Faith? The ability to love the unlovable? Have you learned to be content in obscurity? To trust God in adversity? Has shame brought bitterness or brokenness? David, who spent his share of time recouping from failure said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Ps 51:17).

We all have to die to what is pleasant and attractive; we have to die to the easy path that we might have the courage to

choose the dangerous one. F.B. Meyer wrote that we must be

Buried to bear fruit; maimed to enter life; laying our Isaac on the altar, to become the leader of the faithful; turning aside from the age of a sunlit garden to take the darker, stonier path; renouncing what others hold without rebuke, because of some high purpose which has forced its way into the soul; choosing Gethsemane and Calvary and the grave, in fellowship with the Man of Sorrows; being willing to renounce friends, wealth, reputation, and success, and to be found like a shipwrecked sailor on some lone shore, because of some vision that beckons us (*Moses* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan], 23).

A pastor fell into the sin of immorality. When his sin became known, his reputation was ruined, his career seemingly over. He found a job in a warehouse, an occupation for which he was, to put it mildly, overqualified. Only a few Christian friends stood by him through the experience. No one dared recommend him to another church, though he had repented. Gifted, educated, qualified for ministry, he was now a nobody, rejected and obscure. He could have become bitter, but he began to serve God where he was. He began attending a church—first as a visitor, then as a member, and within time he became a Sunday School teacher. He was faithful in what he did, spending much time being quiet before God.

A year went by, then another. God began to give him greater ability, more opportunities. “God loves to hurt His people,” he would say. “The branch that feels the sharp cut of the pruning knife eventually bears fruit.” Today this man is out of the penalty box and has an effective ministry.

Not every story, of course, has such a happy ending. But if we learn our lessons in the desert, we'll find it's not really a penalty box at all—it's really God's training ground for a deeper, less self-centered ministry. There is a new touch of God that comes in the desert.

Three years after I received the letter from the man who complained about having to spend the rest of His life in the penalty box, I received this encouraging letter from him:

I am writing to testify of the marvelous grace of God. I've learned many lessons in my desert—my penalty box—but God has used my pain to bring me lovingly, mercifully to Him.

Just when I thought I was hopeless, God revealed my sin and self-centeredness that was my sad condition before Him. He stripped me of my pretensions and showed me my unbelief. I learned that God cannot simply be one of my options, but I must risk my life, my soul, my sanity on Him, and Him only. I must believe that He is exactly who He says He is in His Word. When I was most bankrupt, He gave me the strength to forsake all and follow Christ.

Before, my focus was always on me: my happiness, my circumstances, my emotions. Now, it is on God. As a by-product of focusing on Him, His joy is alive in me. Though tough circumstances still have their sting, I can cast my care on Him and He gives me "His exceeding great and precious promises."

It strikes me that these are admonitions I have heard for years, but it is the *doing* of them that makes all the difference.

During my desert times, false cults and false brethren

would offer a way that seemed right, but would cast doubt upon the Word of God. Yet, I found victory by fully committing myself to God. Thank God, I'm out of the penalty box and back in the game.

Moses had to learn that God delights in making servants, not Pharaohs. And He can do His best work in obscurity, not in the limelight. God would rather that we get closer to Him than fulfill our most fond wishes. He will leave us in the desert until we hear His voice and seek Him with a single motive.

Don't let Satan talk you into wasting your failures. God is with you in the penalty box to teach you to serve, trust, and obey. Eventually you may even get to play in the game again.

Moses did not know he had been in training. Getting closer to God, he learned, may be more important than becoming the star player on the team. To be sidelined is not a waste of time if you get private tutoring from the Coach.

But there was so much more to learn.