

Following God's Call

MJCF October 24, 2021

Exodus 2:11-15, Acts 7:30-36

Our ways are not always God's ways. We may have the right purposes, but how we achieve those purposes is just as important as the results. A few days ago, I noticed something posted by a friend on facebook. I think it illustrates well the difference between what we often think, and the reality of God's plan in our lives. <picture 1>...

Isaiah 55:8 and 9 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Sometimes, we assume we know what's best. Sure, we know that pain and suffering are not God's will for people. But, God has a bigger picture in mind that includes the best ways to work at our various situations. God has already taken care of the problem of sin and death, and we are forgiven through the victory of Jesus' death and resurrection. Through Jesus, we see that we need not fear judgement, and death is not the end. But, the influence of sin in our lives will continue until the time when Jesus comes again. Sometimes this means we need to go through difficulties, trusting that in the end God is working God's purposes out for the best. Today, looking at a few examples, I'd like us to think about how our understanding of following God's call can change over time. We'll start with Moses, one of the famous people we read about in the Bible..

Our scripture passages show two different scenes from the life of Moses. He was born into a Hebrew family, but as the adopted son of the Pharaoh's daughter, he grew up in a pampered environment. In the first scene, from the book of Exodus, we read today a story of how Moses reacted to the oppression of the Hebrews. They were forced to be slaves, and serve the Egyptians. The situation was terribly unjust. When Moses sees an Egyptian mercilessly beating a Hebrew, Moses can't take it, and he ends up killing the Egyptian and hiding his body in the sand. Moses thinks no one has noticed, but somehow word of his action starts to spread, so Moses has to run away, and go into hiding, fearing for his life. The story continues with Moses sitting by a well in the land of Midian. We didn't read about it today, but later he helps the daughters of a local priest. One thing leads to another and he marries one of them, settling in the foreign land of Midian.

Our second scene is summarised in the book of Acts. Here, we see Moses 40 years later, tending sheep in the wilderness of Mount Sinai where he encounters God speaking to him through a burning bush. God intends to send Moses to confront Pharaoh and get him to release the Hebrew slaves. In the detailed story, Moses hesitates, but God reassures him. God would work through Moses and his brother, Aaron. Moses travels back to Egypt and confronts Pharaoh in the name of God. When Pharaoh refuses to let the Hebrews go, God sends a series of great plagues against Egypt. Finally, the slaves are freed, but Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army to attack them. The final miracle of God's salvation is seen when the Hebrews are able to cross the Red Sea on dry land, and soon after, the water returns to drown Pharaoh's army.

There are a number of things we can learn from these two scenes, but today I'd like to look at how God called Moses, and how he learned to follow God's ways of working. Notice that in both of the scenes Moses was fighting the oppression of his Hebrew kinsfolk. He saw something was very wrong. There was terrible injustice. People were being brutally oppressed. The first thing we see Moses doing is killing an Egyptian oppressor. The result was not an end to oppression. Instead, Pharaoh is angry with Moses and seeks to kill him. Moses has to flee to a foreign land where he tends sheep for 40 years. In the lonely wilderness he likely learns humility, and to trust more deeply in God. He learns to listen for God's voice, and noticing the burning bush, he stops and receives a message from God. The time alone with God in the wilderness had prepared him to walk together with God, rather than take things into his own hands. Although very reluctant at first, Moses becomes a bold leader through whom God works great miracles to free the Israelites. Earlier, when he had killed the Egyptian he had

been acting on his own impulses rather than trusting in God. Now, 40 years later, he was prepared to walk with God, and fight the oppression according to God's ways of doing things

We didn't read the story today, but there's another story of a key leader learning to follow God's call. It's the story of the Apostle Paul. Starting in the book of Acts, chapter 8 we read that Paul, (originally called "Saul") was persecuting the early followers of Jesus. Paul was an educated member of an elite group called the Pharisees. He was a passionate follower of God, totally believing that he was doing God's will by rounding up followers of Jesus and having them thrown in jail. This describes scene one of the story of Paul. But then, during one of his visits to Damascus, the sky lights up and Paul falls to the ground, blinded by the light. In the light he encounters Jesus, and realises that he has been wrong in his rage of terror against Jesus' followers. Scene two follows where we see that Paul becomes one of the worlds greatest Christian evangelists, a strong follower of Jesus Christ.

Both Moses and Paul began by passionately following what they believed to be right. But, they both later learned that God's ways were different. Murder and violence were not God's ways, and there's always something new to learn about how God works. These days, we also easily get caught up in thinking that we are doing right and following Jesus, but then we realise that we didn't quite have things right. Those are opportunities to learn something new about how God leads. We know that violence and oppression are against God's will, but it's strange that many people think that we sometimes need to use violence or oppression in order to stop violence and oppression. It's like fighting a war in order to prevent new wars from happening. Or, like a parent spanking his child in order to discipline the child and help him remember that hitting other people is wrong.

I thought of some examples where I once thought something was important, but then later changed. One area where I've been changing is in my strong pride in being a Mennonite. My grandparents were Mennonite. My parents were Mennonite, and much of my extended family is Mennonite. At an early age, it was easy for me to feel like Mennonites were right and anyone who wasn't a Mennonite Christian was "on the wrong side." We were the "right" ones. But, over the years, I've had new and positive experiences with non-Mennonite Christians. During my training in working at a hospital, I got a ride to work each day, with a Catholic priest. I found out that those areas where I'd thought our faith would be so different were not that different after all. We just had different ways of expressing it. In our different expression, we can share and learn from each other.

Another area where I've been changing is in the area of biblical interpretation. Before Bible college and seminary, I'd thought that the Bible is like a rulebook. I thought that the job of Christians was to learn all the points that the Bible shares, memorize them, teach them, and live by them. But, in college I found out that there are often more than one equally valid interpretation for various passages. Then, in seminary, I learned that in some parts of the Bible the words written could have actually been creatively put together by a writer in order to teach something. Some passages are not meant to be historically correct, like we'd expect in a modern history book. For example, one story in the gospel tells of how Jesus symbolically cleansed the temple, chasing out the money changers. In three of the gospels this event comes later in Jesus' ministry, but the gospel of John has it near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We might ask, "Which version is correct?" But, John is not as concerned with telling us when it actually was that Jesus cleansed the temple. For John, it's important to start with Jesus' cleansing of the temple, in order to give the message that in Jesus' coming to live among people we now have God's "temple" or presence among us.

Over the years, I see that my faith has been changing. The Spirit has been working in me to help me learn more and change, but I also see the Spirit in people and situations around me. My studies in various schools have helped me grow. Moses' 40 years as a shepherd likely helped him grow in relationship with God. Paul had years of theological education, but what he needed was something more like a "kick in the pants." God gives him a jolt through a blinding light and voice from heaven.

He then changed and saw clearly that he'd been wrong, and needed to change. His passion now turned to building God's kingdom through his preaching, teaching, and letters to various churches and groups.

Where has the Spirit of God been at work in or around you? Has your faith or your understanding of God changed over the years? Our lives are often a journey from working hard for God, to letting go of our own big ideas, and then stepping back to let God choose the ways in which we'll walk. If we remain anchored in God through prayer, Bible reading, worship and fellowship with other believers, we'll no longer need to worry about changing. We'll have the courage to walk in new directions, as the Spirit leads. Let's pray.

O Lord, you have searched our hearts and know each one of us inside out. You know us better than we know ourselves. We all fall short of your perfect will. Help us to admit those areas where we need to change. Thank-you for sending Jesus to take care of the problem of sin. Thank-you for your love, that you care for us, and accept us as we are. We pray for the courage to place our trust in you, that during these changing times, we can keep anchored in your Spirit., through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.