

Lessons from the Life of Jochebed

Jochebed was a daughter of Levi (Exodus 2:1), and the mother of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam (Exodus 6:20; Numbers 26:59). Jochebed was married to Amram. To protect Moses from Pharaoh's command that every male Hebrew child be killed, she placed him in an ark of bulrushes on the river. After Pharaoh's daughter discovered the baby, Jochebed became his nurse. She is noted among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.

Much of what we know about Jochebed is recorded in the first ten verses of Exodus 2. We often think of this passage as the story of Moses, but it might be more appropriate to call it the story of Jochebed—a woman who is relatively unknown to many Christians. (We learn later, in Exodus 6:20, that the father and mother of Moses are named Amram and Jochebed.) Jochebed is usually lost in the shadow of her famous son, Moses, and although she is many times forgotten when studying Exodus 2:1-10, surely in Heaven Jochebed is well known. Jesus reminds us that there will be those who are “last which shall be first and first which shall be last” (Luke 13:30).

The mother of Moses is famous in the eyes of God, not because she bore the baby Moses, but because of her faith—a faith that knew no defeat. “Faith” is one of the most frequently used words in the Christian's vocabulary, but it may be one of the most misunderstood words. We are thinking of “faith” in this lesson, not as **saving** faith, but as **sustaining** faith. Every genuine believer in Christ has already demonstrated saving faith, but sustaining faith speaks of the simple trust in God that one needs to exercise daily, in order to live a victorious Christian life and to serve God acceptably. Sustaining faith, in simple language, is the assurance that the thing which God has said in His Word is true, and that God will act according to what He has said. Surely the words of Hebrews 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to please God,” include the concept of sustaining faith.

The Apostle Paul exhorts in Ephesians 6 that the Christian should have on the belt of truth and the coat of righteousness; our feet should be shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace. And in Ephesians 6:16, we read, “Above all, (put on) the shield of faith, (by which you) shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.” The “shield of faith” is the piece of armor which we are to use to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one! We are to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). It is our Christian duty to walk by faith in this world, until we come to live by sight in the eternal world.

The life of Jochebed is an amazing demonstration of the walk by faith. The story is familiar to many, but so that we have it clearly in mind, we summarize it here.

Israel (Jacob) and his family had gone into Egypt to escape the famine in Palestine. Joseph had revealed himself to his eleven brothers and requested that his father come to Egypt, which the family did. As the years passed, and after Joseph had died, a new king arose in Egypt—a king who had not known Joseph. This king observed that the Hebrew people were growing in numbers, and fearing that they might soon outnumber the Egyptians themselves, the new Pharaoh began seeking ways of reducing the number of Hebrews and keeping them subject to Egyptian authority. The new Pharaoh reduced the Hebrews to

slavery, he robbed them of their liberties, and he put them to work in the brick yards under cruel taskmasters.

At the time when the account opens in Exodus 2, the condition of the Children of Israel was very pitiful. Exodus 1:10-14 describes the hardships placed upon the Hebrew people. Their lives were made bitter with hard service in mortar and brick, and in many kinds of field labor. Exodus 1:14 concludes by saying, "All their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour." But even this severe treatment did not serve to decrease the number of the Children of Israel, and so in desperation, the Egyptian king decreed that every male child born to the Hebrews should be cast into the river. It was at this time that Moses was born to Amram and Jochebed. We will notice several aspects of Jochebed's faith-walk.

1. The Trial of Her Faith

Trials and difficulties and obstacles come to all of us, but for the moment, we want to look at the example found in the life of Jochebed.

The conditions described in the first two chapters of Exodus indicate that indeed those were dark days for the Children of Israel. Everything looked hopeless for the Hebrew slaves. And if all the male children were murdered, it would of course only be a generation or two until as a nation they would be wiped out completely. But among all the poor Hebrew slaves, there was one couple who did not despair. Amram and Jochebed had no fear of the king's decree.

Jochebed was aware, when she was expecting a new arrival in the family, that if the child should be a boy—the decree was that the male baby would have to perish in the Nile River—and if the parents disobeyed, they too were subject to death. Surely this was a time of great trial for Jochebed, but instead of manifesting fear and despair, she seemed to have confidence and hope. When the child was born, the baby was a boy, and we learn in Exodus 2:10 that he was later named "Moses."

2. The Foundation of Her Faith

Jochebed was a human being just as all of us are today. She breathed air just like you and I do. She had feelings just like you and I have. She had hard problems to face just like you and I have. But in the midst of this trial, she had confidence and hope. On what was this confidence and hope based? The answer: It was based on the promises of God's Word.

The parents of Moses knew that the Children of Israel could never perish, for that would be denying the very promise that God had given to their father Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Jochebed knew also that God had foretold the bondage in Egypt which they were now experiencing. God had told Abraham, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance" (Genesis 15:13-14). Thus it was easy for Amram and Jochebed to add up the years of Israel's stay in Egypt, and see that the time of deliverance which God had promised had almost come. It seems that God impressed upon their hearts the conviction that their very

child, Moses, should be the one whom God would use to bring about the promised deliverance. They sensed that Moses was “fair unto God” (literal translation of Acts 7:20), implying that God had some special purpose for their child. On the foundation of God’s promise not to destroy Israel, and on the basis of a four hundred year servitude—the parents of Moses believed that God would preserve him and use him for His purpose.

The God of Israel was more real to Amram and Jochebed than was the king of Egypt. We learn that secret by reading Hebrews 11:23, which says, “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months by his parents, because they saw that he was a proper child, and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment.” Moses was hid in his home for three months, and then in the reeds by the river, not because Jochebed could not bear to see her child perish, or because she loved him too much to cast him into the river. It was “by faith” that he was hidden, not by fear! The parents of Moses believed the simple promise of God’s Word, and the revelation that after 400 years Israel would be delivered, and that their son was a “proper” child—and so, instead of casting baby Moses into the river, they hid him for three months, and then turned him over to God.

3. The Exercise of Her Faith

Jochebed had such a deep abiding faith in the trustworthiness of God’s Word that it drove her to act. She did not sit down and brood about the current situation in Egypt, and say, “If this child is to be Israel’s deliverer, God will somehow spare him and deliver him; there’s nothing we can do; so we’ll throw him in the river, and if God wants him, He can save him.” She knew that God expects us to do our part, and that He will not do for us what we are able to do for ourselves. God could grow a crop of wheat on the concrete pavements of our cities if He wanted to, but He normally expects the farmer to use the means at his disposal to grow a crop of wheat.

Jochebed did not say, “I’m going to throw the child into the river; if he’s God’s man, God will somehow save him.” That is not faith; that is fanaticism. Faith is not testing God by jumping off bridges or having oneself deliberately bitten by rattlesnakes. And so Jochebed did what she could. She hid Moses for a period of time, but as the child’s lungs developed it became impossible to hide him. And when she could no longer hide him, she made a little basket, sealed it with pitch, and put the child in the basket, and laid it among the reeds by the river’s brink (Exodus 2:3). And after Jochebed did all that she could, she went back home—undoubtedly with a great sense of trust that God would work things out according to His plan. Jochebed complied with the royal decree, but in protecting the child from the deep waters of the river, the essential point of the decree (killing the male babies) was disregarded.

4. The Response to Her Faith

Beginning at verse 4 in Exodus 2, we see how God, in response to the faith of this mother who dared to trust in His Word—sets in motion a whole chain of wonderful events to accomplish His purposes and to honor her faith.

First of all, God began to move upon the heart of the pagan daughter of a pagan king, so that at the exact time the baby Moses lay by the river’s edge, Pharaoh’s daughter came to this very place to take a

swim. One wonders why Pharaoh's daughter wanted to bathe herself in the dirty waters of the Nile River. We know from history that all the kings in Pharaoh's day had bath houses, such as even the wealthiest do not possess in our day. But Exodus 2:5 says that the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river, while her attendants walked beside the river.

There was something supernatural and marvelous taking place here. This was God responding to the faith of a mother who dared to trust in Him. And when the little crib was brought to Pharaoh's daughter, she saw that it was a little Hebrew baby. We must remember that the young woman was the king's daughter, and that the hatred for the Israelites was bred into the very core of her being. The expected thing for her to do was to have the little boy tilted over into the water. But once again we see God behind the scenes! The Scripture says, "And, behold, the babe wept" (Exodus 2:6). God saw to it that the baby should weep at this very moment. (Maybe an angel stood there and pinched the baby so that he would cry at the right time.)

Pharaoh's daughter, although a heathen princess, had a woman's (a mother's) instinct, and one thing that touches a woman's heart is a crying baby. When a woman's heart and a baby's tears meet, something happens. Maybe the princess once had a baby of her own who had died, and the sight of baby Moses may have torn the wound open and made it bleed afresh. At any rate, Pharaoh's daughter was determined to give protection to the baby.

God's purpose in redeeming Israel depended at that very moment on the pitiful cry of a little baby. The cry of the little child aroused the maternal instinct of Pharaoh's daughter, and the baby Moses was spared. One of the great hymns of the church says:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

5. The Reward of Her Faith

We have seen now the trial of Jochebed's faith, the foundation of her faith, the exercise of her faith, and the response to her faith. Genuine faith also has rewards. Not only was Moses spared, but his older sister (later identified as Miriam in Exodus 15:20), who was standing somewhere within sight, offered the Egyptian princess her services. And the princess told the little slave girl to go and get a nurse of the Hebrew women—and when she came back with their own mother, Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it" (Exodus 2:9).

A careful reader of the Bible account can almost picture Miriam (the older sister of Moses) running to her mother and telling her what had happened. I think we can see the fond expression on the mother's face as she said with great joy, "I knew that God would provide!" Jochebed's faith was rewarded by being reunited to her own child. In fact, the goodness and mercy of God were so great that the mother was even paid for nursing her own son! God's providence was seeing to it that Jochebed was being paid from royal funds to look after her own child. This is a clear example of how God gives, provides, and answers more abundantly than we can even ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). That's how God does things. He does them in a big way if we dare to trust Him.

As we journey through life, all of us—like the parents of Moses—will have our faith tried. The Apostle Peter says, "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). The proving of our faith is planned by God to bring praise and honor and glory to Him in the day when Jesus Christ reveals himself at His Second Coming.

The afflictions of life are like driving through a tunnel. The sun has not stopped shining just because the traveler in the tunnel doesn't see it. Just so, the Son of Righteousness is still shining, although in the dark tunnels of our trials and afflictions, sometimes we fail to see Him. When trials come our way we must learn to be patient and trust and wait. The time of darkness is planned by our Heavenly Father to bring praise and glory to Him in the great day when Jesus returns. God, who is the great Architect of our destinies, allows nothing to come into our lives except that which is for our ultimate good and blessing (Romans 8:28).

One of the most stimulating accounts in the Bible, pointing to great faith during trial, is that of Job. His possessions were all gone; his body was racked with pain; his wife added to the pain of his soul by urging him to curse God and cry out for death. His three "friends" sat for seven days and simply shook their heads in despair without saying a word (Job 2:13). Finally, when they did speak, they concluded that Job was among the worst of sinners, and that he suffered as a result of deep sin in his life (Job 4:7).

We indeed must marvel at Job's faith. He turned to his three friends, and said in essence, "Although I don't know why I am called upon to face this trial, I do know the joy of fellowship with God, and though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15). Job had some low points in his experience, but repeatedly he expressed his confidence in God's faithfulness. He said, for example, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth" (Job 19:25).

We face a variety of trials. Trials are of many kinds and they change from day to day—and vary from person to person. For some, poverty comes, friends disappoint, children bring heartaches, and feelings of inferiority torment. For others, health deteriorates, death takes a loved one, and plans for the future are shattered. For some, there is a lack of the assurance of the forgiveness of past sins. For others, a family member rebels against the Gospel plan of salvation. Whatever it is, we must remember that God is still on the throne—that He is behind the scenes working out all things for our ultimate good. And so, when we have done all we can do, we must calmly trust in the Lord—even though to us there seems to

be no way out. We must put on the “shield of faith” and believe that God is sending the trials to prepare us for even greater blessings.

A little boy spent many hours making a small boat and then he took it to the lake. He had a string tied to the boat and was holding the string in his hand—but the string slipped from his fingers, and a breeze carried the boat beyond his reach. With tears running down his cheek, he appealed to an older brother for help, and the brother picked up big stones and threw them out toward the boat. The smaller lad began to cry even more, because he thought his brother was trying to sink the boat. But soon he noticed that the stones were going **beyond** the boat and forming huge circular waves in the water—and those waves were bringing his boat toward the shore. Just so, when we get beyond our depths, and when we get in deep water, we cry out to God for help. Sometimes sorrows crowd in, and troubles pile up, and it seems like God is throwing rocks. Just remember—this is a trial of your faith planned to bring honor in the day when Jesus reveals himself.

The poet says:

Go then, earthly fame and treasure,
Come, disaster, scorn, and pain.
In Thy service pain is pleasure,
With Thy favor—loss is gain.
I have called Thee Abba Father;
I have stayed my heart on Thee.
Storms may howl, and clouds may gather,
All must work for good to me.

For those who have become followers of Jesus Christ, the final note of this message is a call to persevere in the faith no matter how many obstacles have appeared along the way. Jesus says to us, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America