

Hebrews 11:23-27

“The Greater Wealth of Christ”

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Epiphany Season

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 11:23-27. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

*23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.*

*24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells two very short parables to describe the kingdom of heaven. They go like this.

*44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

*45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, 46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

I think what stands out first in these parables is the inestimable value of the kingdom of heaven.

To partake of this kingdom, to know God and be known by him, to be a participant in the kingdom of Jesus - to be baptized according to his command and to follow in his way, is of almost unimaginable value.

It is like a treasure hidden in the field. It is like a singular pearl of great price.

But if you read the parables more closely, you find that they also hint at something else. And that is the cost required to partake of this kingdom.

The individuals who discover the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price must first sell all that they have in order to gain possession of the treasure and the pearl.

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus teaches, is of inestimable value. But it will also cost you everything you own.

This two-fold dynamic of treasure and cost is, in many ways, the hidden secret of the kingdom, understandable only to those who commit themselves to Jesus over the decades of their lives, and should be a regular focus of our meditation as we consider what it means to follow Jesus in our lives today.

In other words, you won't really understand what it means for you to follow in the way of Jesus unless you hold onto both of these realities at once - Jesus and his kingdom is more precious than anything. But Jesus and his kingdom will also cost you everything.

And this truth about the kingdom's value and the kingdom's cost is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated in all of the Old Testament than in the story of Moses, which is where the Apostle directs our attention today.

The apostle begins by describing the circumstances of Moses's birth in verse 23: *By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.*

If you know your Old Testament you'll remember that Moses was born during a time of great trouble for the people of Israel.

Hundreds of years before, Jacob and his sons had emigrated to Egypt in a time of famine, and had been welcomed by Pharaoh and the Egyptians because of their connection to Joseph, who was Jacob's son and also Pharaoh's viceroy.

But since that time, centuries have passed.

The descendants of Jacob, known collectively as Israel, now number in the thousands, and the current Pharaoh has forgotten Joseph and his service to Egypt, and sees these foreigners as a threat to his kingdom. As Exodus 1 tells us, *"The Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel."*

And so Pharaoh first enslaves the people of Israel, making their lives bitter by hard service, and then he engages in a program of total destruction of the Israelite people.

Pharaoh commands his soldiers to find every son born to the Hebrews and to throw the little baby boys into the Nile so that they will die - the desired effect being that the female Israelite children will grow up and be forced to take Egyptian husbands - thus ensuring the extinction of the Israelite race.

Pharaoh's program of ethnic genocide perpetrated against the Israelites was horrifying, and was in this context that Exodus describes Moses' birth and the courage and faith of his parents.

We've heard this story already this morning, but it's a passage that is worth reading again. Listen to the account of Moses' birth:

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. 4 And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. 5 Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. 10 When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."*

The ironies and literary depth of this short passage is remarkable.

The word for basket in verse is the same used in Genesis 6 for the ark that Noah was to build, and truly, Moses is committed to a little ark in a time of great danger and the potential extinction of his people, pushed out by his parents onto the great river of the Nile trusting that God would rescue and deliver him even as he had rescued and delivered Noah and his family and saved the human race from total destruction.

It's also fascinating that the way in which Moses is saved, thanks to the courage and ingenuity of Miriam his sister, is that he is restored to his family's household, allowed to be brought up by his own parents, and his mother actually receives wages from Pharaoh's household to raise her own son - a foreshadowing of how, one day, the Israelites would take the gold and silver of Egypt with them as they left the house of Pharaoh.

What is going on here, however, is deeper than simply a desperate man and woman doing whatever they can to save their child in a time of great danger.

Hebrews tell us that they went to such great lengths to hide and then save Moses because he was a "beautiful" child - not so much that his physical appearance was attractive, but that they recognized that he was a special child, a child of promise born to them.

To understand this we must remember that the suffering of Israel in Egypt was not a random event caused by envy or geopolitics or anything else — no, this experience of suffering was actually predicted by God to their forefather Abraham in Genesis 15, hundreds of years before the events recorded in Exodus 2.

There, after making his covenant with Abraham, the Lord said to him: *"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions."*

That prophecy given to Abraham by the Lord was handed down to his descendants, such that, as the years went by in Egypt, those faithful Israelites anticipated that their deliverance was coming.

And it seems that somehow, by the leading of the Spirit, Moses' parents knew that he was special, marked out by God, and so they protected him from Pharaoh's edict.

Calvin puts it this way in his commentary on Hebrews 11: *"The parents of Moses were moved to save him not simply out of anxiety to continue their posterity, but because God had promised when they were oppressed by slavery there would some day be an avenger. In this confidence they preferred their infant's safety to their own."*

In other words, Moses' parents risked their lives to save their son not only because they loved him, but because they believed the promises of God, and that their baby boy might be the deliverer God had foretold.

And so, because of their faith, Moses's mother and father received him safe and unharmed back into their household, where they raised him as a small child, undoubtedly teaching him the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and raising him in the worship of the true God.

But one day, they had to give little Moses again into the household of Pharaoh - believing that the Lord would keep and protect their son even there. It must have been so painful. The only way to protect their son's life was to surrender him into the hands of their oppressor - the same man who was literally murdering the babies born to their friends.

The only way forward for Moses' mother and father, as it is so often in the Christian life, was to relinquish control and entrust themselves and their child to the promises of God.

And so, Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household as his daughter's son, as one of his heirs. He had access to enormous wealth and power and received what must have been one of the finest educations in the ancient world. And he had the hope of a long life of luxury and security - perhaps even to be made Pharaoh himself one day.

But the Spirit dwelt in Moses, and we can be confident that his parents never stopped praying for him to not be deceived by the pleasures of wealth and power.

And by God's grace Moses remembered those stories and those promises passed to him by his true parents, and according to Exodus this is what happened:

*One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.*

Moses went out and saw the suffering of his people. And that day, he made a fateful decision, a choice that would set him on a path for the rest of his life.

He acted as an Israelite, not an Egyptian. He intervened in an act of cruel violence taking place before his eyes and put one of the oppressors to death.

And then, as the next few verses describe, he abandoned his palace, his gave up his place of security, his position, his wealth, and left Egypt only with his life. For Moses, the kingdom of heaven cost him everything.

The apostle puts it this way in Hebrews 11:

*24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.*

I think the important thing to see here is that, according to the apostle, Moses understood what he was doing. The action he took to protect that Israelite and put the Egyptian to death wasn't a decision made in the heat of the moment. It was a calculation.

Moses possessed power and luxury and security, but he understood those things as fleeting and insignificant. He saw the suffering and the slavery of his people and he decided - that was the better place to be.

And this, the apostle says, is what it means to live by faith. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

To live by faith means forsaking the fleeting pleasures of sin. To see whatever gain sin might seem bring to your life as illusory, as a deception, as a trap.

And to live by faith means to see the reproach of Christ — that is, the calling to suffer with Jesus — as greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt.

So what do we do with a passage like this?

I think it's easy to read a passage like this and think - well, that's Moses. I mean, he was special. He was the deliverer of Israel, obviously the stakes were high. My life is just normal. What do I have to give up?

But here's the thing. Jesus imagines all of our lives, no matter how insignificant they may seem, to be of the highest importance.

The stakes for each of us are unimaginably high.

Jesus looks out on the crowd, and he says to them, in a completely sober way:

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?*

What Jesus wants you to do friends, is to value your soul and your life appropriately. He wants you to decide what it is that you believe is truly valuable, and then live as though that were true.

And in the context of this passage in Hebrews, this means two things.

First, it means to reject the fleeting pleasures of sin.

So I ask you, what is the sin that you are tempted to find pleasure in?

It might be something obvious, like harboring lust towards someone who doesn't belong to you, or pornography, or some other hidden sexual sin.

Or it might be the pleasure of numbing your anxieties or your sadness with more alcohol than you know is good for you.

It might be hoarding your money and spending it on yourself and your pleasures rather than living a life of generosity.

Or it might be the insidious and surprising pleasure of bitterness, the delicious feeling of tearing others down with your angry words, the self-indulgence of refusing to forgive those who have sinned against you.

What is the specific sin or sins whose fleeting pleasure you are tempted to overvalue? And what would it look like for you to embrace confession and repentance, to put those sins to death, to see them as the empty shells of pleasure that they really are?

That's the first question this passage asks of us.

The second is this. What is the reproach of Christ that you are meant to value more highly than all the treasures of Egypt?

Suffering with Jesus is, according to Paul, the greatest honor any of us can ever have.

He writes in Philippians that it is to suffer with Jesus is what he desires more than anything else in this life.

*Paul says, "For the sake of Christ, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like Jesus in his death, that by any means possible I may obtain the resurrection of the dead."*

And Paul wasn't speaking theoretically here. He really did suffer the loss of all things. He was disowned by his family and persecuted by his former friends. He suffered the loss of wealth and influence and safety. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. And eventually he suffered the loss of life - and in all these things, his suffering was glorious because he did not suffer alone, but always with Jesus.

I don't know what suffering with Jesus looks like for you, friend.

It might mean enduring in a difficult marriage.

It might mean sacrificial service to someone in need.

It might mean bearing sickness or physical pain in your body.

It might mean refusing to be dishonest in your job even if that hurts you professionally.

It might mean giving up your desires for the sake of obedience to Christ.

It might mean simply being faithful for years in a calling that feels anonymous and unseen.

Whatever suffering with Jesus looks like for you, I know it is something you are called to.

Because all of us are called to suffer with him. It is a fundamental part of

But I know you are not only called to suffer with Jesus, you are called to value your suffering as well, to see your participation in the reproach of Christ not just as a necessary evil, but as greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt, because the gospel proclaims that as we suffer with Christ we come to know him more deeply and we become those who attain, with Jesus, the resurrection from the dead.

Friends, this is what I know about the kingdom of heaven.

It is like a treasure hidden in a field that you must sell everything you own to possess.

It is like a pearl of great price that you must give up all you have to buy.

And whatever the kingdom of heaven costs you, it is worth the price.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.