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Jochebed: By Faith

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Series: Little Known Legends

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Few people realize the greatness of this woman. She is seldom spoken of. Though many are aware of what she did, her acts of heroism and faith are not even considered important enough by many to connect them with a name. Not so with God. To Him, she is a living legend. In fact, He even pays tribute to her in His Scriptural Hall of Fame in Hebrews, chapter 11. Her life is characterized by bravery, wisdom, faithfulness, and most of all, the essence of motherhood.

Her name is Jochebed. Does that help? It doesn't? Perhaps that's proof positive that we have not given this woman of God the recognition she deserves. And as we continue our trek through the "Little Known Legends in Scripture", we plan to do just that.

PHARAOH'S FEARS

To prepare our hearts for her entrance into history, we have to ask God to transport our minds back to Egypt, where some 64 years earlier, Joseph, the Hebrew hero, had saved a nation from starvation and had been united with his family after years of separation. The Israelites lived happily in the land for much of those 64 years, but soon a new pharaoh came into power, and the rapidly multiplying Jews became a potential problem to this new monarch. "Would they not pose a threat to Egyptian safety if they were allowed to continue to bear children and grow in number?" The answer he gave himself was, "Yes". His resolve was to neither let them gain control or to escape, but rather to keep them there as slaves, all the while controlling their population so they could not become strong enough to be a threat. The story is familiar to virtually everyone. The Egyptians set taskmasters over the children of Israel and afflicted them with great burdens. They used them to build treasure cities for the Pharaoh, such as Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted the Hebrews, the stronger in spirit they seemed to become.

Pharaoh's next move was an attempt at mass murder that failed. We read about it in Exodus, chapter one, verses 15-22,

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names

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were Shiphrah and Puah,

“When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.

Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.

And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

(Exodus 1:15-22 NIV)

The land of Egypt had become a house of bondage for the Jew. What was once their place of refuge and deliverance had turned against them. And so it often is with our earthly cures. So often God allows us physical deliverance from a situation and we begin to trust in the circumstances rather than focusing on the God who used them. Egypt was no longer a resting place for God’s people. It had become a burdensome scene of persecution and distress to teach the Jew that this was not his home.

And does not God sometimes do that for us? Does He not often take the very things we thought we had to have and allow them to turn on us so we can see they are not the source of our eternal satisfaction? Egypt had turned from heaven on earth to hell on earth. And yet the Jews did not war against these vicious taskmasters who had so made their lives a nightmare; rather, they served them all the more. And the more grace God gave them, the more frustrated their Egyptian masters became.

Did these Hebrew midwives tell the truth? There is no reason to doubt that they did. God may have supernaturally arranged for these children to be born so easily and so quickly that these women were not needed. Whatever the case, God had touched their lives and they feared Him. God honored them for their boldness and

their courage, and gave them families of their own.

THE STORY UNFOLDS

The Jews, meanwhile, only multiplied the more. God seemed to cause them to bear children at an incredible rate, and the threat to Pharaoh and his kingdom seemed at least to him to be multiplying as well. So Pharaoh developed his next measure of desperation. He now passes an edict that every boy baby born to a Hebrew must be thrown into the Nile river and drowned. And here is where our heroine comes into view.

Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman,
And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she
saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.
(Exodus 2:1-2 NIV)

I think you are beginning to put two and two together. The story is familiar to you. The name is not. You have to go to Numbers 26 for that information. It reads like this,

The name of Amram's wife was Jochebed, a descendant of
Levi, who was born to the Levites in Egypt. To Amram she
bore Aaron, Moses and their sister Miriam.
(Numbers 26:59V NIV)

So our living legend has a name. Here once more was a woman of excellence, a mother designed by God for a destiny far beyond her wildest imaginations. She bore two incredible children prior to the event just described. Their names were Aaron and Miriam. And no other children born in their generation had a greater impact than they did, except for one. And that one, believe it or not, was to be born to this very same extraordinary woman. Imagine, if you will, the torment Jochebed and Amram must have faced as it became closer and closer to the time for her to deliver her third child. It had been difficult enough trying to raise children in a land where they had suddenly become unwanted slaves. The pressures on the family were intense. No one knew at what point in time the government might simply take the children away or even put them to death.

And now this. Word was out that a new law made it a federal offense for a Jew to have a boy baby. Such a delivery must result in instant murder by drowning. The Nile River had gone from a source of beauty and life to an executioner's graveyard and a source of death. As the months went by, Jochebed must have somehow prayed that this third little one would be a girl, but God did not

answer her prayer as she asked. He often doesn't. His ways are so much higher than ours. He had a plan for her and for this child that stretched beyond her ability to comprehend. So he allowed what appeared to be a disaster in order to glorify His Name.

IT'S A BOY!

The day came when the child was to be delivered. Joy suddenly turned to grief. It was a boy! Amram, according to tradition, named him Joachim, though later he would be renamed by his adopted mother. To drown the child was not an option to his parents. And so for three long months, they hid him from the Egyptian authorities, praying that somehow he would escape their watchful eyes. But as time went on, that option ceased to be realistic. It was only a matter of time until he would be noticed, and then, regardless of their objections, he would instantly be thrown to his death.

But God had a creative alternative. He always does. The scenario is so familiar to you, it hardly bears repeating, but sometimes familiarity causes us to miss the subtle shades of meaning in Scripture. So let us read it one more time.

But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.

His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. (Exodus 2:3,4 NIV)

A BABY AND A BOAT

This was no afternoon afterthought. It was quite a project. Amram and Jochebed took the leaves of the papyrus, a reedy plant which grew plentifully along the banks of the Nile, and braided it together to give it strength. These leaves were often used in baskets, boats, sails, and even for making ropes and writing materials. They then took "slime" or "bitumen" that was found bubbling from the ground in many places, a substance used even today for mortar to hold bricks in place. Mixing it with some kind of tar-like substance, they made a kind of waterproof adhesive which literally made the basket become a floating ark, or a miniature sailing vessel. It wasn't a "quick" project. Hours of planning and working went into creating this baby boat for their baby boy.

It was at this point that the grieving mother had to place her precious baby, a child that, according to verse 2, had special

qualities even from the womb, into the tiny sailing ship they had so lovingly created. And with tears, no doubt streaming down her face, and a prayer for a miracle coming from her lips, she watched that tiny gift from God float downstream, out of her grasp. You can almost feel with her the need to jump in at the last minute and rescue him. She knew that, apart from God's intervention, she would never see the baby alive again.

But God's intervention had been planned even in eternity past. And as that tiny child floated away, the hand of a sovereign Creator held him as securely as if he were in his mother's arms. The passage continues,

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to get it.

She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

(Exodus 2:5,6 NIV)

What a coincidence! No, what a wonderful God we have. Until Jochebed turned loose of that child and placed him in God's hands, the next step in his life could not take place. That is often true of our children as well. Now she was no longer in control of his destiny. Only God could save him. That is, of course, when God delights to save. And on this particular day, it just so happened that Pharaoh's own daughter had gone to bathe in the River Nile, just downstream from where they loosed the child and let him go.

The Nile was regarded as a sacred river, and it was not uncommon for royalty to bathe there. On this particular day at this particular hour, it was the ruler's own offspring that happened to be bathing in the company of her slave girls. As she bathed, she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. And she heard what seemed like a baby crying. Sure enough, her maids rushed into the stream and found the tiny baby, secure and dry in his own little waterproof container, woven together by a mother's love.

"It's one of those Hebrew babies!" she exclaimed. And the real King, in whose heart all royalty really rests, placed in her heart a love for that child. Here is what happened next,

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

"Yes, go," she answered. And the girl went and got the baby's mother.

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Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. (Exodus 2:7-9 NIV)

Miriam scurried down the river bank to follow the little tyke and see what happened. There she comes across Pharaoh's daughter, who by now has her little brother wrapped in her arms. She looks up into the eyes of this bathing princess and offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her. She just happened to have someone in mind. "Great idea," the woman replied. Miriam, all out of breath, runs upstream and grabs Jochebed by the arm, taking her back to where the woman and her slave girls were, and to where the child she had just given up rested safely in their arms.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PROMISE

"Would you take this little baby and nurse him for me?" the young princess asked. "I will gladly pay you!" Oh, what a sense of humor God has. She gave up her baby into God's hands, and He gives him back with reward added. I don't think it took Jochebed long to come up with an answer. She agreed to do so. And she took her own precious Joachim home and, free from the tyranny of governmental intervention, she gave him the love and care she longed to give.

But, of course, this isn't the end of the story. If you or I were writing it, the music would swell, and a scene of Jochebed and her little boy walking hand in hand would fill the screen, as the credits began rotating from top to bottom. The End. But of course, God's plan for God's man was much more involved than this. This exciting experience was only the tool God used to keep the baby alive. Now he had to go on to manhood and be the vessel God would use to deliver His people, Israel.

The saddest verse in the story comes next,

When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:10 NIV)

"When the child grew older..." the passage begins, "she took him." How old he was, we don't know. Perhaps a year. Perhaps older. By now, Jochebed had grown to love him even more deeply, for no doubt by now she could see the spark of God's presence in that little life that seemed to be there almost from birth. God has something in mind for little Joachim. And yet, she had promised to give him back to the woman who had saved his life.

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Try to imagine her feelings that day when she walked into the palace carrying her precious son and laid him in the arms of that Egyptian princess. Immediately, the child was renamed “Moses” which means “drawn out of the water.” And the Scripture records, “He became her son.” Tradition had it that this only daughter of Pharaoh had no children of her own, and that God had chosen Moses, though a Hebrew, to be heir to the throne of Egypt. We don’t know.

We do know he was given the finest in education, the most extravagant of clothing and food and toys, and the respect reserved for royalty alone. But we read in Hebrews,

By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,

choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,

esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.

By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

(Hebrews 11:24-27 NKJV)

BY FAITH, MOSES

This child literally came from the womb with a heavenly perspective, and he came into the arms of a mother who knew God personally. What a difference a godly mother makes. What must it have been like for Jochebed to watch from afar as Prince Moses played on the palace playground? As he marched in the royal parades? As he was spoken of by the Egyptians with such pride? Must there not have been a mixture of pride and grief? Pride at what he was becoming, grief that she was not there to enjoy it with him, or to teach him what was and what wasn’t important.

But, oh, Beloved, somehow God taught him. Because when decision time came, this young man chose to defend his own people and incur the wrath of the one who seemed on earth to hold his destiny. Of course, his first stab at greatness was a failure. That allowed God to take him from the palace to the hillside where he could be groomed in the ways of the Real King.

Apparently, he had a choice. The Scripture says so. And apparently he chose the better part, to suffer as God’s man rather than bathe in the affluence and prosperity of those who were making the lives of his people so miserable. The Word says he made those

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choices because he had a vision of another world that superseded his vision of the palace and all the prosperity that accompanied it.

But go back one verse in Hebrews 11. There is another tribute there. And it's not really meant for Moses. It reads like this,

By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the King's command.

(Hebrews 11:23 NKJV)

By faith, Jochebed and Amram, seeing how special this child was, risked their lives for his. They knew the king's command could not ultimately withstand the King's command. They did it by faith. They believed in Jehovah God's ownership of that little boy with such intensity that they were willing to lay their lives on the line for his.

BY FAITH, JOCHEBED

So it might well read, "by faith, Jochebed." For in the midst of her greatest trial, there came her finest hour. Twice she had to give up what was hers, because what was hers was God's. Each time she gave him up, God got glorified, the child got blessed, and she ultimately was honored.

We don't really hear much more about Jochebed in Scripture. But oh, we hear a lot about Moses. And about Miriam. And about Aaron. Perfect? No, they had their moments of failures, too. But, oh, what a family to claim as your own.

I suppose Jochebed is ignored in Scripture for the most part for a reason. You have to hunt even to find her name. Most of the passages simply refer to her as "the child's mother". Somehow, I think that's how she'd have wanted it. She sought no fame, sought no acclaim, sought no rewards. What she did was done quietly in the background, and her only real claim to greatness lay in the hearts of her children, and that was enough for her.

I know some Jochebeds. I know some women who have given up all claim to greatness in this world just to be the mothers God called them to be. Some live in the shadows, changing diapers, fixing meals, holding crying infants, cleaning dirty houses, walking sick babies, never really recognized by either the world or the church.

You can find them at three in the morning when all the world's asleep walking on tip-toes into baby's room just to be sure he's

covered. You can see her in a rocking chair trying to cool the fevered brow of a tiny one who has tasted the bitter pill of disease at an age when they seem so defenseless against it.

As the child gets older, even more thankless become her tasks: taxi service, cleaning woman, repair service, tutor, nurse, friend. Often, her own identity seems submerged beneath the mask of that one common word: Mother. And some, as single parents, face an even grimmer task, motherhood alone. Is it worth it? Oh, Beloved, ask Jochebed. It is worth it, indeed.

For from her womb and from her home came the children that became the men and women God chose to use to change their world. What more of a contribution could she have made than that? And from the sacrifice of her own son into the hands of a sovereign God, came a tribute from the Holy Spirit, that she was, indeed, a woman of faith. Somehow she believed that no matter what it looked like, God had her children in His grasp. Wicked kings and corrupt governments and ruthless laws could not take from her what God had given to her.

And so by faith, Jochebed. No greater tribute can be paid to anyone than that. By faith, she gave up what was not hers in order to gain in eternity what had been promised. It's a difficult choice. Do you clutch at that precious gift and vow to keep your child from life's unpleasant circumstances? Or do you release your child into the arms of the only One who is capable of keeping your child safe?

It's a question every parent must answer. At some time in each child's life, when you have done all you can, it becomes apparent that from now on, either God protects and provides and transforms, or all is in vain. And so with tears in your heart, and perhaps on your cheeks, you place that child, or that teenager, or that young adult into a basket woven out of the reeds of love, coated over with the cement of sovereignty, and you place him in the river of life. You then watch him or her float gently downstream into the waiting arms of what seems like the enemy. You let go and you pray. You pray a lot.

How it will turn out you do not know. Where the child will end up you cannot say. But one thing you know. He or she is in even better hands now than they were in your tender arms all those years. The child was God's at the beginning. Your trusteeship one day must end. Oh, you never stop loving. You never stop praying. And you never stop hurting when they hurt. But, you stop controlling. For

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by faith, they are no longer yours.

By faith, Jochebed protected the child when only she could, and by faith she released him, as only she would. As she watched him float down that river and later handed him into the arms of that pagan princess, by faith, Jochebed demonstrated that there is, in reality, no greater faith than the faith of a mother. She gives most of her hours to that precious bundle of life. And even if he or she becomes perhaps an angry rebel, the love never stops, and the faith never ceases. Someday, by God's grace, who knows what that child can become?

When your heart starts to break, remember Jochebed. When your child starts to stray, remember Jochebed. When your hopes start to fade, remember Jochebed. Remember Jochebed, and rejoice.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord we worship you this morning that You are a Sovereign God. It's hard for us to grasp what this woman may have gone through to twice give up that which had been given to her—to watch that little baby float away, to hand that little child into the hands of that pagan princess, to walk away and know that from that moment he became hers. How difficult. How she must have imagined that the imprint of the world would forever make its mark upon that little boy and that never could he be God's man the way he could have been. And yet somehow supernaturally, out of her arms into God's hands, he became the man God wanted him to be. Give us the grace by faith this morning, father, each of us to relinquish our control of those things, which are beyond our control, and allow Your sweet Sovereign Will to be done. May like Jochebed, we be willing to trust You for the outcome. Thank you for this woman Father, and the imprint she made on the Annals of Scripture. She is a Living Legend indeed!

In Jesus precious name,

Amen

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