Scripture: Exodus 2:11–15a
Title: Moses' Wilderness School /translated by Doyun Kwak

1. Moses' Childhood and Youth

Do you ever iron clothes? We iron clothes when we want to smooth out the wrinkles. Reading the Bible is a little like ironing. The Bible does not always give us every detail of what happened. A lot is left out or compressed between one verse and the next. Our imagination works a little like an iron, helping us smooth out the wrinkles between one sentence and the next. The story of Moses is like that too. It needs a little ironing. When we read Moses' story, a new chapter in his life begins when he is placed in a basket and discovered by an Egyptian princess. We are told that he grew up, and then almost immediately, the story jumps ahead to Moses as an adult. By then, he is forty years old. The Bible does not tell us much about his childhood, his teenage years, or his years as a young man. It leaves those years to our imagination. So let's imagine for a moment what Moses' childhood might have been like. Imagine being adopted into the British royal family today and growing up in the palace. At the very least, you probably would not go hungry or live without the things you needed. You would wear the finest clothes. You would eat food prepared by the best chefs. You could probably have every game console you wanted, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch, all of them. You could have NBA 2K27 and every Super Mario game you wanted. Of course, you might also get tired because there would be so much you had to learn. Etiquette, philosophy, music, art, horseback riding, fencing, and all kinds of other training. You would be trained in everything expected of someone growing up in a royal family. Moses probably grew up enjoying the best life Egypt could offer. As a prince, he probably grew up lacking nothing. So what made a man who had everything kill an Egyptian? It seems that Moses thought of the Hebrew people as his own people. He must have grown up knowing that he himself was Hebrew. Perhaps his mother taught him this while she was raising him as his nurse. And as I mentioned last week, because Moses was a Hebrew boy, he would have been circumcised when he was eight days old. Even among the other princes, he must have sensed that there was something different about him. There must have been times when he struggled with his identity and wondered where he truly belonged. It seems to have taken Moses about forty years to work through that question of identity. That is a long time. Perhaps Moses thought, "Once I am around forty and I am ready, then I will be able to do something for my people."

2. Moses at Forty

When Moses turned forty, he put that thought into action. One day, he saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian, and something in him could not simply stand by and watch. A sense of justice rose up in him. Moses could have stayed in the palace, kept out of things like this, and continued living a comfortable life. But he chose to get involved in the suffering of a Hebrew man. When it became known that he had killed the Egyptian, Moses fled to the wilderness of Midian. This story also gives us a glimpse of Moses' personality. He seems to have had a quick temper. He could be impulsive. This was not something he had carefully planned. His emotions got the better of him. And when Pharaoh began looking for him, Moses could have stood his ground as a prince and tried to deal with the situation. Instead,

he ran away. We see a timid side of him too. Perhaps that timidity had something to do with the discrimination he may have experienced among the other princes because he was Hebrew. Moses may have spent years thinking, "When I turn forty, I am finally going to do something great." But just like that, the plan he had carried for so long was gone. Overnight, his whole status changed. He went from prince to fugitive. He had spent forty years preparing, and now he was being driven into the wilderness.

No matter what kind of work you do, by the time you reach forty, don't you usually have some stability in your career? Aren't you also at a point where you can begin to have a voice in your field? Forty is that kind of age. For those of you in your twenties and thirties, if you use these years well, by the time you reach your forties, you may be in a position to do some of the things you have wanted to do. Your twenties and thirties are years when you begin building the principles that will guide your life. If you do not build those principles in your twenties, you may reach your forties without a strong foundation and find yourself easily shaken. Your twenties are a time to make mistakes, try things out, and work through some important questions. What principles will guide your relationship with God? What direction will your life take? How will you handle money? How will you build relationships with other people? These are things you begin to establish and test during those years.

Now, children and teenagers, you do not need to take all of this too seriously yet. At your age, one of the most important things you can do is play. Children who have really learned how to play know that life is fun. At your age, you need to discover that life is worth living and that life is interesting. If we compare our whole life to a tree that eventually bears fruit, your teenage years are the season when the tree is in bloom. It is one of the most beautiful seasons of life, and it does not come back. That does not mean you should put off the things you need to do just so you can play. Do what you need to do, but enjoy life as much as you can. Learning how to play well is also part of becoming a creative person. Sitting in front of your phone or the television and staring at a screen is not really playing. Stop watching Shorts and go outside and play. Children, that is one way you can prepare well for the time when you are forty.

3. When Things Do Not Go According to Plan

What can we learn from Moses at the age of forty? We may make our plans, but God is the one who directs our steps. Moses' plan fell apart. But just because Moses' plan failed, did God's plan fail too? Moses had thought that when he reached forty, he would finally do something to help the Hebrew people. Then, in a single moment, he became a fugitive, and that plan disappeared. But it was right there, when Moses' plan failed, that God's plan began to unfold. We never know exactly what is coming next in life. That is life. It is like a football. You never know which way it will bounce. But that is also part of what makes life interesting. If everything always happened exactly the way we wanted, there would be no tension and no thrill. Part of the fun of life is that things do not always go our way.

Whenever I read the story of Moses, I think about something I had carried in my heart since my twenties. I used to think, "When I turn forty, I will really begin my ministry." I had decided in my early twenties that I wanted to go into ministry and become a missionary. So I thought I should spend those years preparing myself so that when I reached forty, I would be ready to really begin the work I had been preparing for. When I was in college, I took time off from

school and spent eight months in China learning the language. About eighty percent of the Chinese I still know today came from those eight months. When I was young, I also wanted to serve as a short-term missionary so I could find out whether God was calling me to become a long-term missionary. Your twenties are a time when you can look at life over the long run and try different things. Through those experiences, I became convinced that I wanted to go to northwestern China, to places where other missionaries did not want to go, and minister among Muslims. Later, I became a staff member with a college ministry and gained ministry experience. As I served, I realized that I needed formal theological training. Even after graduating from seminary, I continued studying because I thought I would eventually teach theology on the mission field. Step by step, I was preparing for ministry. After I was ordained, I thought it would be better to experience full-time pastoral ministry in Korea before going straight to the mission field. So I served as an associate pastor for three and a half years. And somewhere along the way, I turned forty. At that point, I asked the church where I was serving whether they would be willing to send me out as a missionary. They gladly said yes. But when I told my wife that we should go to China, the mission field I had dreamed about from the beginning, she said she would go anywhere except China. I thought, "What do we do now?" Then the mission department of our denomination contacted me and asked whether I would consider going to Jordan as a missionary. It was still ministry among Muslims, and I thought, "If it is the Middle East and an even harder place, maybe that would be even better." So I asked my wife, and she said, "Let's go to Jordan." It seemed like everything was coming together smoothly. Then suddenly, the Islamic militant group ISIS attacked Jordan. The Jordanian government declared an all-out fight against ISIS, and tensions rose quickly. Our church told us, "We cannot send you to a place that dangerous. You need to choose another mission field." So my wife and I prayed earnestly. In the end, we went to China, the place we had wanted to go in the first place. I thought everything would finally go smoothly once we got to China. But very little went according to plan. Through that process, though, I began to see God's plans, and I learned that God's plans were different from mine. So if things are not going the way you hoped, or if life is not unfolding the way you wanted, do not be discouraged. I believe God has another plan. And after I finished writing this entire sermon, I went out for a walk. When I came back, the whole sermon manuscript was gone. That is life. It felt as though God was using a visual aid to teach me this lesson himself.

4. Wilderness School

Today's story is about Moses, who had spent forty years in the royal palace being trained as a prince, suddenly transferring to a school in the wilderness. Moses enrolled in Wilderness School. And he would spend the next forty years there being taught directly by God. Everything he had enjoyed before was gone. In the wilderness, Moses had no one to look to but God. Some of you may be thinking, "Pastor, forty is already behind me. I am heading toward seventy or eighty now. What about me?" Moses entered the wilderness at forty. For the next forty years, until he was eighty, God kept shaping and reshaping him in the wilderness, making him into a new person. Moses was eighty years old before God really began to use him in a major way. So if you are getting close to retirement, or if you have already retired, your life is not over. Your real life may begin after retirement. I am actually

very excited about my own life after retirement. I hope that after I retire, I may be even more useful to God. That does not mean we should neglect the life we are living now. The life we live today becomes the foundation for the life that opens up tomorrow. So we need to do our best right where God has placed us today. Moses now began life as a shepherd in the wilderness. For forty years, he learned how to care for sheep. Later, that experience prepared him to become a shepherd to the people who came out of Egypt. Because Moses had lived in the wilderness, he was able to lead the people through the very wilderness where he would spend so much of his life.

For some of you, Rochester may feel like a wilderness. It may not be the place you wanted to be. It may not look anything like the life you had pictured for yourself. But God shapes us into new people in the wilderness. If we are in the wilderness, it may be a sign that God wants to use us. If you make it through Wilderness School and graduate well, God will take your life and use you for his great work.

When I look back at my own life, I can see this too. I wanted so badly to become a missionary in China. I loved the Chinese language, Chinese history, and Chinese culture. So I thought that once I arrived in China, everything would go well. But China turned out to be the beginning of my wilderness. Three years after we were sent there, the pastor of our sending church asked whether I would consider moving to another city, about eight hundred miles away, and serving a Korean church there. So with almost no preparation, I suddenly became the senior pastor of a Korean church. I learned a great deal by stumbling through one thing after another. Then, only a year later, I was expelled from China. From there, our time in the wilderness became even harder. Just as Moses was driven out of the palace and lost everything when he entered the wilderness, our family suddenly lost everything we had loved. It truly was a wilderness. God invited our family into that wilderness so that we would stop depending on everything else and learn to depend on him alone. Missionaries who had been expelled were given a one-year sabbatical, so we used that time to come to California to study. Life in California was drier and harsher than I had expected. The cost of living was high, and our financial support was not always steady. But even there, we experienced God feeding our family and taking care of us. The wilderness became a season when our whole family learned through experience that God was the one taking care of our lives and leading us. Looking back, I think we were able to endure those difficult years because my wife and I had already gone through wilderness training in our twenties and had learned to depend on God alone. It seems that most of God's people, especially those God intends to use as leaders, pass through this Wilderness School. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, and many other leaders in the Bible all went through the wilderness. If you are going through a wilderness right now, it may be a sign that God has a new plan for you. I hope all of us can recognize and accept the wilderness seasons of our lives, and continue to grow and mature there. I believe the Lord will bless us and guide us in the middle of the wilderness.