

“Our Family Tree: Moses”

Every once in a while, for us who are preachers, we end up finding ourselves facing a task (in our preaching) that there's no way we think we can take it on and do it justice. There's just too much going on in the text. There are too many possible directions to take. There's more than enough material to work with, let alone lessons to pull out, especially if we want to touch on everything that's there.

What I've learned, over the years (in my preaching) is that it's (more often) better to take on what you think you can handle, than to try handling more than you think you can take on. It's better to err on the side of fully developing a few main ideas than to try to develop everything all at once.

Well, this past week (as I was getting ready for this message), I found myself torn on which of those two directions to take. After all, in this series we're calling “Our Family Tree,” where we're looking at some of the people (in the Bible) who make up our more-extended spiritual family, we end up with only one week to pull out whatever life-lessons we can from each of the characters we're taking on; one week to (learn what we can) from the lives of each of the Old Testament relatives we've chosen for this series.

This week's character, our ancestor Moses, is one of the characters in which there is far more material to go after (in one sermon) than there is time to go after it. There are more chapters dedicated to the life (and the work) of Moses than there is to anyone else (in the entire Bible), with the possible exception of the New Testament apostle Paul.

What I've chosen to do, as a result, instead of narrowing Moses' life down to a few main points and developing just a (few ideas) from that, or choosing to go after (all of it) and not giving any of it the time (and attention) it deserves, is to (shoot for the middle) and do a little bit of both. I want to start today by giving us a “big picture” overview of what we find (in the Bible) about the person and work of Moses, and then (from there) to hit on some of the life-lessons we can take and apply for ourselves; a little of both in today's message.

So, let's start the “big picture” overview. I don't how much you know about Moses. I don't know how much you've read. He's one of the more familiar characters.

If you've seen the movie, “The Ten Commandments,” you probably have a good idea of what Moses' life was about. The movie touches on a number of the major themes. It also adds (as I'm sure you know), a few details (and story-lines) in the production that are (more Hollywood) designed to sell than they are (actual scripture) designed to save.

Anyway, regardless of that, the life of Moses is one that, (even without Hollywood), could easily become a best-selling story. His life, his work, his accomplishments – it's quite a list. The writer of the first five books of the Bible; that, in itself, is quite a feat. In the truest sense of the word, he was one of the great “prophets” of the Old Testament; Moses was the “spokesman” for God on many occasions. He was the great “Lawgiver” in the Bible, the one (through whom) God worked to give us the Ten Commandments. He was also the one chosen by God to lead the nation of Israel to the Promised Land of Canaan. It's quite a list...and those are only the highlights. No matter how you come at it, the life of Moses is as accomplished and storied as it gets.

Nonetheless, even with all of that, as great as Moses' life and story might have been, his life and (his story) are each set in the context of the biblical story written and directed by God. God is the main character in the story, as he is throughout the Bible. God is the one doing the saving work. And he's doing it, as we've been following in this series, not only through a number of flawed individuals and not-so-functional families, but also through a nation that was more reluctant to follow than it was ready to be faith-filled.

The context for Moses' life was the slavery of the nation of Israel under the Pharaoh of Egypt. The story of Exodus, (the second book) in the Bible, picks up where the first book (the book of Genesis) leaves off. The only disconnect is that the entire story had disconnected from where it was at the end of life of Joseph (the character we studied last week) and the beginning of the life of Moses (whose life and story) we're taking on today.

Chapter one, verse six, (it says), “Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them.” (And then it says), verse eight, “Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt.” And that’s when their years of bondage and slavery began.

The story of the birth of Moses sets the stage for almost everything that follows. God has his fingerprints all over this story. (It was our first reading this morning.) Because the nation of Israel was becoming so great, the Pharaoh had ordered that all of the male babies born were to be killed, and it was happening. They were all being killed...except for this one. Moses is not only saved (in the story) by Pharaoh’s daughter, but is actually nursed by Moses’ mother and ends up (growing up) in Pharaoh’s house. It’s incredible how God works!

Now, we don’t have time for all the detail, but it all starts to happen (rather quickly) and (fall into place) after that. Go down the list of what happens. See if you can follow:

- In chapter two, Moses realizes that he’s not an Egyptian, but a Hebrew, (an Israelite), and when he sees his people being treated as slaves, he kills one of the Egyptian task masters.
- In that same chapter, the next day, the word of what Moses has done gets out and, (scared for his life), he ends up fleeing from Egypt (and the Pharaoh) to the land of Midian, where he finds a wife, settles down, and begins to raise a family.
- From there (in chapter three), it’s the story of God speaking to Moses from a burning bush, telling him he is the one, chosen by God, to become the nation’s deliverer.
- In chapter four, it’s one excuse after another, offered by Moses, as to why God (in choosing him) had chosen the wrong one.
- In chapter five, (after running out of excuses), Moses goes to the Pharaoh and demands that he let the Israelites go free.
- In chapter six, it doesn’t work...the Pharaoh refuses to listen...it says, God had chosen to harden his heart.
- In chapters seven through ten, we find the ten plagues. If you remember (those chapters)it becomes clear that God is the one in control, but the Pharaoh still refuses.
- In chapters eleven and twelve, that’s where we find the story of the Passover, that tenth and final plague that would finally lead to the deliverance of the nation of Israel from their bondage in Egypt...and that would ultimately point to the deliverance of all people through the death and resurrection of Christ.
- From there, Moses leads the people out of Egypt, into the wilderness, across the Red Sea, where, for the next forty years (because of their refusal to trust in God), they would wander until they would finally be allowed to enter the Promised Land.
- Some of the other detail: manna in the morning, quail at night, water flowing from nothing more than a rock.
- Dangers avoided, enemies defeated, a strange and (almost unbelievable) building of a golden calf.
- Along the way, God would give them the Ten Commandments, all of their moral and civil and ceremonial laws set into place.
- A covenant was confirmed, a tabernacle was constructed, the establishment and consecration of priests all came about.
- And while they were wandering, for those forty years, if nothing else, they would come to know and believe that God truly was (and is) in control.

All of that to say that the story of Moses and how he was used by God is as powerful a story (in the Bible) as you will find. If you’re not familiar with it, I’d challenge you to go back and read it...the book of Exodus. (Even if you are, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to read it again.)

Now, all I have done (so far) is to give you a “big picture” overview. There are far more events and details (in this story) beyond some of the highlights I’ve just shared. But I said I wanted to do two things...And so, let’s move beyond the story itself, for a few moments, (some of the history), and see what practical life-lessons we can take away from the life of Moses. There’s a lot going on in this story. There are many lessons to learn. Let me narrow it down to just three.

Here’s the first. Moses was a leader. He did some incredible things for God. He was (arguably) the greatest leader Israel ever had. But he was a reluctant leader. He had all kinds of excuses. He wanted to find

(any way possible) to get out. But God took him from where he was, prepared him for what he was called to do, and worked through him to carry out his will.

Here's the first: When God calls us, he prepares us for what follows. When God calls us, he prepares us for what follows.

On our Church Council Leadership Team (here at the church), we're working our way through a book by J. Oswald Sanders titled, "Spiritual Leadership." I read it for the first time (myself) about a year ago. We started reading it as a Council back in February.

I wish I would have read it 30 years ago when I started my ministry. It's written for pastors and for church leaders. It deals with the things God is looking for in those called to lead. But it also lifts up lessons that can be applied in almost any (and every) area of life: leadership in your work, leadership in your home, spiritual leadership in your marriage and your family and among your friends.

One of the consistent responses (from our Church Council members), as we're reading through it, to almost everything that is said, is that God must have chosen the wrong ones. We don't have what it takes. We can't be what God has called and wants us to be.

Do you know what we're finding? Do you what we're figuring out? We're finding, figuring out, that we were right. We don't have what it takes. We can't be what God has called us to be. We don't, and we can't, and we never will. What he's looking for (from us) is beyond what we (on our own) will ever have. We're also finding out, also figuring out, that when God calls us, he prepares us for what follows.

Do you know what I find interesting about the story of Moses' life, when it comes to his being a leader? Do you know what's interesting? What's interesting is that when God calls Moses to be a leader, God already knows that Moses would have a laundry-list of excuses for why it's not going to work.

"I don't know your name? What if they want some kind of proof? I'm not very eloquent. I stumble over words. I'm slow of speech, slow of tongue. O Lord, please send someone else!"

God already knew (when he called him) that Moses would have excuses. God already knew (when he chose him) that his excuses might have actually been true. But he called him anyway. He chose him anyway. And in calling and choosing him, he promised that he would give him (whatever he would need) and prepare him for whatever lay ahead.

Now, I don't know what God is calling you to do in your life. I have no idea what God is preparing for your future. What I do know is that the excuses don't work. God has no time for our laundry list of reasons "why not." The only "why not" that works (for him) is the one that comes from him.

"Why not" in your family? "Why not" among your friends? "Why not" at your work, or in your marriage, or in what's happening in and throughout your school? Why not you? Why not me? Why not all of us who have been called by God? Why do you think it all depends on you? It doesn't...and it never will. It all comes back to him. That's the first lesson: When God calls us, he prepares us for what follows.

Here's the second: When God delivers us, he expects us to trust. When God delivers us, he expects us to trust.

Now, we didn't read the whole story, but that's what (the whole) story is about. It's about God's deliverance of the nation of Israel. It's about God working to set the people free from their bondage (and slavery) in Egypt, to become landowners (and settlers) in the Promised Land.

When God led them out of Egypt, he expected them to trust. When God delivered them from the Pharaoh, there was no reason in the world why they should not. But it didn't happen. Read through the story, and it's not what they did. In almost every chapter, there's something about what they (now had) that they didn't like.

At first, it was the food. Then it was the water. Then it was the enemies on the other side. Ultimately, they complained because they wanted (and thought they needed) a new God. Can you believe it? After all God had done (and promised), no matter what he did, it was never enough.

I read the story of Moses (and the nation of Israel) and I can never figure out why they didn't trust. It makes no sense. It doesn't seem to fit...until I (turn it around) and start looking at my own life.

Do you ever do that? After all God has done for you? After everything he has given, including the deliverance from sin and death won for us in his Son, Jesus Christ? Do ever find yourself wishing there would be more? Do you ever find yourself worrying about what (in your life) you don't have?

All God ever (asks of us) is that we trust. All God ever expects (from us) is that we take him at his word. He may not promise you the Promised Land, but he does promise to lead you as you go.

One step at a time, one challenge at a time, one step of faith that leads to the next, and the next thing you know, you might actually end up being there.

But you need to take that first step. You need (in your life) to learn to trust. Because (the reality is), in Jesus, you have been delivered. The truth is that God has, in Christ, set you free. The next step is up to you. The next steps are up to us. That's the second lesson: When God delivers us, he expects us to trust.

And then, third: When God commands us, he's doing it as a gift. When God commands us, he's doing it as a gift.

The story of Moses' life is incomplete without making mention of what happened on Mount Sinai. We mentioned it in passing in that "big picture" overview, but it deserves more time and attention than just that. After forty days and nights on the mountain, alone with the Lord, Moses emerges with what we know (today) as the Ten Commandments, written by God himself, given to his people, and offered to them and to us as a gift.

Broken into two parts, the first three commandments are written to shape and guide our relationship with God. The final seven are given to help form and fashion the relationships we were to have with others.

If you keep these two commandments, Jesus said, "Love God and love your neighbor," there's nothing more that God will ever ask you to do. They cover them all. He also said that if you do this, (you follow these commands), your life will be better off.

Did you know that almost every major country in the world bases its laws on the moral system set up in the book of Exodus? (It's true.) The Ten Commandments are the foundation for almost every moral system that exists today. The countries (and peoples) that keep the Ten Commandments are among the most stable (and secure) nations in the entire world.

Now, we could build an entire sermon series around the commandments God has given. It's probably a series we should (at some time) and in some way take head-on. For today, let me leave it with this.

Go back through history, and not just the history of the nation of Israel, but all of history. Go back through history and you will find that every nation that strays away from the foundational truths offered to us in the commandments of God, that it's only a matter of time and those nations collapse. They don't survive. They don't last. And they don't last, because they've chosen to build their nations on things that don't last. It's only a matter of time.

It's the same thing with the family. The family structure given to us by God, and the foundational truths that are designed to be the foundation of family life, it's the same thing. Families that choose to build their lives on a different foundation, it's only a matter of time before those family structures begin to crumble.

Make it even more personal. The same is true when it comes to the individual life. People build their lives on all kinds of things (these days) and all kinds of things make promises (these days) for what they can give. The only one who can give us what we need is the one who gave us life (at the start) and who gave the life of (his Son) for us, as he offered it on the cross. Every other foundation (at best) is only of this world. And if it's only of this world, then (ultimately) there is no lasting hope.

On this weekend that brings to a close a week of remembering and celebrating our freedom as a nation, and on a Sunday when we remember the freedom from slavery (and the deliverance) that was brought about (by God) through the person of Moses, let us never forget that the only true independence we will ever have is one that is ours as we remember our dependence on God.

One final thought before we close, and with it, maybe one last lesson. It's not where we're focusing today, but did you hear what it said in our second reading this morning, from the book of Hebrews, chapter eleven, the great faith chapter of the Bible? Did you hear what it said about Moses and what he chose to do?

It's so short, you can easily miss it. (Let's not miss it.) Here's what it said. (It said), "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose (instead) to be mistreated...rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin."

"He chose to be mistreated...rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin." That's leadership. That's deliverance and freedom. May the same be said of us. Amen.