

## MOSES AND HIS PREPARATION FOR A GREAT TASK

### INTRODUCTION

One of the best-loved and perhaps one of the greatest stories in the Old Testament is the Story of Moses. I have chosen to preach a series of three sermons on that story. Now some of you may wonder why, when the world's in the condition that it's in, a preacher would go back some thirty-two hundred years to a story about a man who lived in an entirely different part of the world and under circumstances quite different from those that you and I live. Why do we do this? The reason is simply this: sometimes we see ourselves and our situations a little bit better when we look into these great stories from the past. We often find in them a perspective of depth that we seldom find the shallow currents of present day thought. Therefore, today and for the next two Sundays, we shall be looking into the deep well of the Story of Moses and together we shall see what the reflections of that story tell us about ourselves, our situations and the world in which we live.

### IT BEGINS IN EGYPT

This story of Moses, of course, begins in Egypt. The people of Israel had been in Egypt a long time. No one knows for sure just how long they had been there, but we do know that they went there originally in order to get food because of the severe famine in their own land. They went there of their own free will, but they stayed on against their will. At first they were welcome by the Egyptians, but with the passing of time things changed. Gradually they were fenced in by the Egyptians - enslaved, repressed. The situation for them became intolerable and interminable. They had gone to get food and they had gotten more than they had ever bargained for and it appeared that there was no way out.

All of us are familiar with Egypt. In a sense, all of us have been in Egypt at one time or another in our lives. What I mean to suggest is simply this that while none of us have ever been slaves in the literal sense of the word, we do know what it is like to be slaves in the figurative sense - i.e., to be caught in a situation, to be the victim of circumstances which we can neither change or control. A man, for instance, caught in the clutches of a job to which he is not by talent, temperament, or nature particularly suited, and yet because of the circumstances involved, he sees no other way out but to stay with that job. Or a person caught in the entanglements of a domestic crisis which grows tighter and more tense with each passing day, and from which we sees no way out except through the low road of the divorce court. Or a person who is a slave to a habit, a bad habit, a degrading habit, a habit he knows to be bad, perhaps alcoholism, and yet in spite of all efforts to overcome it, he finds he cannot. Figuratively, you might say, such persons are living in Egypt. Well, my point is this - that's how it was with the Israelites at the time that Moses was born. His people were slaves in Egypt, slaves in the literal sense, and it appeared there was no way out!

Moses was born of parents who were living in bondage in a mud hut on the banks of the Nile. And not only was he born a slave, but but he was also born with the threat of death hanging over him, for the Pharaoh of Egypt had declared that all male babies born to the people of Israel were to be cast into the waters of the Nile. Not a very promising outlook for an infant boy, not a very promising time in which to have been born. Perhaps you could suggest a better time.

Perhaps even our own time, and yet when you stop to think about it, even our own time which lives under the shadow of atomic warfare doesn't offer a new life a promising outlook. But it seems that God has a way of getting around obstacles and handicaps "his wonders to perform". Only a few years ago a man died in the Southland of our own country who had been born a slave. When he was a small boy he was traded for a broken down race horse. Do you know that it's been estimated that that small boy who seemed of such little worth, grown to manhood, contributed by his discoveries material values adding up to the total sum of seven hundred million dollars. And he contributed to mankind even much more in terms of Christlike character. His name was George Washington Carver. Even so, God took this Hebrew slave who was born of poor parents living in a mud hut in bondage on the banks of the Nile River and lifted him up and used him for a great task, no lesser task than that of bringing about the birth of a nation. Yes, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform". It was true then and it is still true even today. God has a way of bringing to pass his great purposes sometimes even in spite of all human efforts to the contrary. It's interesting to reflect upon how God prepared him for this great task. He did this by sending him to four schools, and our procedure in the remaining time will be to briefly touch upon these four influences that fed his life and molded his character and prepared him for this task.

#### FIRST: THE HOME

The first and most important training he received was at the hands of his father and mother in his own home. He had the privilege of being born to humble and pious parents. In spite of all difficulties, his parents had managed to remain free in mind and heart and had also managed to remain loyal to the God of their fathers, the great God of Israel. How all of this came to pass, of course, is one of the most interesting parts of this story. His parents went against the decree of Pharaoh and did not throw their infant son into the waters of the Nile. Instead they put him into a basket and then hid the basket in the bulrushes of the Nile, and of course in doing this, they were risking their own lives. Here he was watched carefully by his sister Miriam during the day and at night was brought home.

Of course this arrangement could not last for long. And soon the infant Moses was discovered in the basket among the bulrushes, and it was Pharaoh's own daughter who discovered him. It's hard to conceal a baby. I know from my own experiences that sometimes they'll cry out just at the wrong moment, and sometimes it's in the middle of the night when you're trying to get a good night's sleep. Anyway, getting back to Moses, Pharaoh's daughter discovered him, and when his sister Miriam who was watching saw that the Princess meant no harm to her infant brother, she came forward and offered to find a Hebrew nurse for the child. When permission was granted, she hurried away to fetch the infant's mother. And when this good woman arrived, the Princess put little Moses into her arms saying "Take this child away and nurse it for me, and I will give thee wages".

And so it was that the mother of Moses stayed with her infant son and in so doing had opportunity to shape his young, tender and formative years. And but for this, Moses would undoubtedly have given his loyalty to the Gods of Egypt rather than to the God of Israel. It was in his own consecrated home, with little beauty except the beauty of a goodness born of a vital faith in God, that Moses received his first and most important training. I think it is always this way, or should always be this way. The most important training

a child receives is in the home - at the hands of his mother and his father. Not just one of them, but both of them.

SECOND: FOSTER MOTHER

His second course of training he received at the hands of his foster mother. By virtue of the fact that he had been introduced into the royal family, he came to know the courteous and gracious ways of the palace. You see his own mother only had him for a few short years. As a boy he was brought up in the palace. It was through this adoption that the best schools of the day were opened to him and thus it came to pass that he was soon the possessor of one of the best minds among the young men of the palace. The record tells us that "He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in deed and word"

THIRD: THE WILDERNESS

The third school to which God sent Moses was that of the wilderness. Moses did not go to this school altogether by his own choice. It was not part of his original plan to flee into the wilderness. The wilderness, think of it, unpopulated, uncultivated, unfamiliar wasteland. The picture of depression and of the low moments that you and I have when we pause and wonder what life is all about. More than one person has fled into the wilderness. Moses was in the wilderness forty years. Our Lord was in the wilderness forty days. One does not have to go to Arizona or Arabia to be in the wilderness. One can be in the wilderness in the middle of Times Square here in our own city.

Remember what it was that happened that sent him into the wilderness. One day this brilliant young man, trained by his mother to hate injustice and wrong doing, went to visit his own people. And while there he saw an Egyptian imposing upon one of his own people, and in hot anger Moses struck the Egyptian and killed him. He probably didn't intend to kill him, but when he realized what he had done, I hardly think he was sorry. Perhaps he felt that the man had asked for it. And he was sure of this too that he had made a good beginning of his work of freeing his own people. He was confident that by this deed he would win their confidence and that they would look to him as their friend and deliverer.

But it didn't work out this way, at least not at this time. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting each other. He interfered in the fight and tried to make peace between them, but one of them pushed him aside and said in a rather rudeway, "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us". Apparently it was this response that sent his great dream of freeing his people crashing to the ground. How easily they pushed him aside. And who was it that did the pushing? A nameless slave! And who was it that they pushed aside? Why Moses - a great, a brilliant and powerful man. So effectively did this slave do his work that Moses took to his heels and fled into the wilderness. Not only did he fear the wrath of Pharaoh for having killed the Egyptian, but even more than this, he feared the pettiness of his own people. He had been so sure that they would accept him. But what if they rejected him? He had been so sure that they would respond to his leadership with gratitude, but now he began to doubt himself.

Upon leaving Egypt, Moses made his way to Midian where he married the daughter of a certain priest named Jethro, and there he became shepherd of his flocks, and for forty years the record tells us he

tended sheep belonging to another man. During that period of time I'm sure there were times when he missed the excitement and glamor of the palace, times when he missed the great dreams of service which he had had as a younger man, times when he hated himself for being a coward and running away from it all. Perhaps he tried to convince himself that the ambitions of his youth were impossible of realizations. His people were still in bondage, but that fact was no fault of his. It was their own fault. He had tried to help them but they had turned him down. So it seemed to him. He was entering into middle age and it seemed that his future was behind him and that things had slipped through his fingers. In spite of his vast gifts and opportunities and talents, he had very little to show in return for God's great investment in him. And yet on the other hand those forty years were not completely wasted. Here God had been training his servant for his great destiny. Year by year Moses had been getting better acquainted with the land through which he was one day to lead his people. And this too, here he had been dying more and more to his own importance. Something I suppose every person has to go through before God can use him for truly great and magnificent purposes - dying to his own importance.

#### FOURTH: THE BURNING BUSH

And so all of this brings us then to the final step in his preparation, a step that might be regarded as part of the wilderness experience, but because of its importance, I have singled it apart. I refer of course to his face to face meeting with God at Mount Horeb. One day as he went about his task of shepherding the sheep, he saw a bush, a bit of dry shrubbery burst into flame and it failed to go out. "I will now turn aside and see this great sight" said Moses "as to why this bush is not burnt". And as he turned aside, God spoke to him. It was here in this experience that we call the burning bush that Moses got a new and firmer grip on the faith that had been given to him by his parents in his early years.

This face to face encounter with God reminded Moses of how he had once blazed against injustice and wrong doing. It reminded him of the hot earnestness that had once glowed upon the altars of his heart. Those fires had gone out and he had become disillusioned taking for granted of course those wrongs that he had once been so sure could be righted. It reminded him, as it reminds us, of the lost enthusiasms of our earlier years. So often those fires burn low and sometimes even go out within our hearts. This experience made him realize that he had lost God somewhere along the way. This gifted man had begun his task, in spite of much that was fine, hampered by pride and self-confidence. And this experience I think made him realize that his strength was not in his own gifts, not in his own talents and personality, but the source of his real strength was in God. He had lost God, and in losing God he had drifted into the wilderness of indifference, indecision and doubt. And finally this experience at the burning bush helped him to realize above all else that God did care, that God had not ceased to care even when he himself had stopped caring. God was concerned supremely concerned and deeply involved in the plight of his people. "I have seen the affliction of my people and have heard their cry. I know their sorrows and am come to deliver them"

Thus by these four schools did God train Moses for the great task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. With a staff in his hand and with a sense of the undergirding of the Almighty, Moses returned to Egypt to awaken his people. But this takes us into next Sunday's sermon which is entitled, "Moses and the King of Egypt"