



# **NORTHMINSTER**

## **Baptist Church**

**3955 Ridgewood Road  
Jackson, Mississippi**

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**“Remembering Who We Are: Moses”**

A Sermon  
by  
John R. Claypool  
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**Scripture: Acts 7:17-38**

We are presently engaged in a series of sermons on the general theme: “Remembering Who We Are.” It is based on the theory that memory is a crucial component of identity. If I would come to terms with what I am and what I can be, I must take into account what I have been and all that vast and ambiguous background out of which I have come. This is as true religiously as it is in a physical or family sense, which is why I have proposed to turn back to the Old Testament and look again at some of the central figures there. These are the individuals who make up our spiritual heritage and mark the way that we have come across the centuries, and not only can we learn **from** them, as we can from any human being, but as we learn **about** them we are living more deeply

into our own reality, and that is a matter of great importance indeed.

Thus I want us this morning to continue this journey of “going through home again” by looking at perhaps the most towering figure of all in the Old Testament — I am referring now to Moses, that legendary deliverer and law-giver, who served as midwife in the birth of the nation Israel. There are other characters who loom large in the pages of this document, but none had any greater practical impact on the shaping of our heritage than the man Moses. What was the secret of his life, and how was he able to do all that he did? Once again, the material is far too voluminous to be exhaustive in only one sermon. I want to focus in on just two areas — his relation to God and to the Hebrew people, and see if we cannot discover there clues both to the genius of Moses and our own human potential.

Obviously, Moses’ interaction with this God called Yahweh was the central experience of his whole life. He was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob you will recall, but by this time these people had migrated down to Egypt and had become enslaved by the Pharaoh there. It was from his parents that Moses undoubtedly heard the family tradition about this God Yahweh Who had acted in history and had chosen this people for a purpose. Such a vision must have taken deep root in Moses’ mind, for even though by a bizarre set of circumstances, he had been discovered by the Pharaoh’s daughter and adopted by her and raised in the royal palace, he never forget this image of a God Who acted in history and had a purpose to fulfill among the Hebrew people.

Moses began, then, with a general idea about God, but as the story unfolds, it is clear that he had much to learn about how this One actually works in the day-by-day experiences of life. Like all adolescents, who are given to grandiose and dramatic categories, Moses started out expecting the spectacular. He himself acted brashly and seemed to expect God to cut “the Gordian knot” of enslavement in one grand gesture. This sort of thinking undoubtedly lay behind his act of killing the Egyptian slave master who was abusing a Hebrew. I am confident the young idealist thought the revolution would begin at that moment — that God would act from heaven and the Hebrews would rise up as one person and seize their freedom. Imagine, then Moses’ great dismay when nothing happened in response to his violent act. God did not send lightning from heaven, and the Hebrews began to murmur distrustfully rather than rallying to him. When word got

to the Egyptians of what Moses had done, for all his idealism and “good connections” in the palace, he had to flee for his life into the desert with his grandiose dream of liberation in shambles.

This was a crucial “rite of passage” for Moses, as it is for all adolescents, where the way you thought it was in childhood collides with the way it really is in reality. Many people never negotiate this stage of development, and either revert back to childlike illusion and live forever in pathetic fantasy or give up altogether and become cynical and closed. Significantly enough, like the prodigal in Jesus’ parable, Moses chose to take neither of those approaches, but proceeded “to come to himself” or “come of age” and relinquish fantasy for reality rather than the other way around.

At this point, perhaps the traditions of family lore helped him to grow as he did, for there alone in the desert he may have remembered how one of his ancestors, a man named Joseph, had handled a similar experience. He, too, had begun the pilgrimage of personhood with a grandiose image of himself and God, and by acting impatiently and arrogantly as Moses had, he had gotten himself rejected by his kinspeople and become a lonely refugee far from home. Their situations were remarkably alike, and Moses remembered how Joseph did not give up on the face of such adversity. What he did do was stop dreaming all these grandiose things about himself and his destiny, and went to work paying attention to the things that were at hand, the day-by-day realities which one can handle with integrity and creativity or not. This was the crucial breakthrough for Joseph — becoming attentive and faithful with the realities in reach, and it was there as collaborator in day-to-day struggles that Joseph discovered God to be at work. He is not just the Lord of the spectacular — He is to be found in little things as well, and this is how God worked in the life of Joseph. He did not become Grand Vizer of Egypt in one miraculous swoop. That goal was reached more subtly, by Joseph’s patient and faithful handling of little details — first as a slave, then as a prisoner. The ways of God were neither quick nor immediate nor obvious in Joseph’s life. The “mill of God” ground slowly and through much struggle in this one’s life, and I am guessing such a memory was of enormous help to Moses as “fresh out of prep school” and ready to conquer the world, he found himself a total failure, wandering the wastes of the Sinai Desert.

But like Joseph before him, Moses did not give up

or collapse. His vision of God as a Wonder-worker gave way to a vision of a God Who collaborates with us in the day-by-day struggle with little things. Thus, he settled down, not just to make the best, but the most of the opportunities that were at hand. He became a shepherd in that desert region, and proceeded to learn the terrain of a country that he would one day need to know in leading a whole people. More importantly, he learned to be patient with a God "whose ways are not as our ways and whose thoughts are not as our thoughts," One Who is always good but never obvious.

And it was this attentiveness to detail, this willingness to let God be what He was and do what He would do, that led up to Moses' call forty years later. On the back side of Sinai one day, he noticed a phenomenon he could not explain — a bush was on fire but was not burning up. Had he regressed or become cynical about life, he would never have noticed such an insignificant happening. But that was just the point — Moses had stopped looking for God in the spectacular, and had learned to be sensitive to the so-called "little things." The text says Moses "turned aside in wonder and curiosity" to explore more fully this thing he could not explain, and there he encountered Yahweh and was commissioned to do on God's terms what years before he had attempted on his own. This is how the great work of liberation was begun, not with some cataclysmic sign in the sky, but a single bush burning and "a still small Voice" articulating His purpose.

This is such an important point to learn, I think, about our human interaction with God. There are moments of miracle and ecstasy when God for His own purpose breaks in from Beyond and intervenes. He did some of that in the course of finally getting the Hebrews out of Egypt. There were the plagues and the parting of the water and the manna and the quail. But far more common than such extravaganzas was this collaboration in day-to-day struggle, the strength to endure long stretches when nothing seemed to be happening. I have said often before that "rising up with wings as eagles" is only one of the ways God becomes "our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble." According to Isaiah, "running and not being weary," that is collaboration; and "walking and not fainting," that is simply enduring what cannot be changed are as much the work of God as miracles and intervention. We run a real danger of setting people up for disillusionment if we imply that "miracle is God's only name."

At times, to be sure, He does enter history in this form, but by no means exclusively this way. The growth that we see in Moses' understanding of what one can expect of God is helpful indeed to all of us in our expecting. God does work in history. Events are the language He employs. We are not alone ever in the struggles of every day. But thinking of this only in terms of the spectacular and the miraculous is infantile indeed. More often than not God does things with us and not for us, and sometimes only gives us the strength to endure circumstances rather than to change them. We then, are the ones who change, not the condition around. This widened understanding of how God works is what sustained Moses throughout his long struggles, and it has to be one of the reasons why he was able to accomplish as much as he did. He was not finally disappointed in God because he grew in his perception of all the ways this One is at work in history. And we would do well to grow with him. Disillusion is almost always the child of illusion. To expect wrongly is to be disappointed. Moses' growth in God is a powerful corrective to this happening to us.

A second clue into the power of this man lies in his attitude toward the people he was called on to help. Elements of nobility began to emerge early in Moses; for remember, although he was a Hebrew by birth, he had been adopted by Pharoah's daughter and raised in the palace as an Egyptian prince. By virtue of these opportunities, he became something quite different than his kinspersons who languished in slavery, and how easy it would have been for him to have turned his back on them and contented himself with his privilege. There really are just two kinds of folk: those who work to make the world a better place for everyone and those who work to make a better place for themselves in the world as it is. Moses was of the former stripe. He could have ignored the enormous good fortune that had befallen him and forgotten all about his less fortunate kinspersons, **but he did not!** What was happening to them made a difference to him. He could not rest at ease in luxury while they were languishing under oppression, and so he chose the way of true morality — he voluntarily took on problems he could have avoided in behalf of his brothers and sisters, and let it be said this is the only way that progress can be made in the area of social justice — when those who are not involved as victims are willing to become involved in behalf of victims.

This is utterly essential, but is actually only one side

of the matter, and Moses was quick to learn the other side, which is that maturing and liberating can only be done **with** and not **for** other people; he could not do it alone. His act of killing the Egyptian overlord was an honest attempt to hand his people freedom on a silver platter, but it does not work that way. Freedom, like maturity or an education or anything of a personal nature, must be claimed and participated in by the people themselves. You do not inject realities like this into people like penicillin. The victims must want to be different and be willing to participate in their own healing before any significant growth occurs. This is why the more mature Moses came back from the desert and spoke first to the Hebrews before he did any confronting of Pharaoh. Did they want to be free, and if so, were they willing to take and pay for that human treasure? Unlike his first efforts, this time they were ready, and this participatory willingness was as much an ingredient in the Exodus event as Moses' willingness to forego ease and get involved with them.

There were other aspects of Moses' relation to these people that were significant also. He realized the movement from slavery to freedom could not be simple or instant. For people who had had no freedom for four hundred years and been totally regimented in every phase of their lives, it was an enormous leap suddenly to be out from under that and on their own, and it is no wonder that they floundered and fumbled a great deal at first. Who of us does anything perfectly the first time around? The difference between a proficient and a beginner in anything is great, and Moses understood this basic fact and was therefore patient and affirming as one has to be in order to facilitate maturity.

Moses also knew that responsibility developed through the use of freedom, it cannot be a prerequisite for freedom. The Exodus account makes it very clear that the Hebrews were unprepared for the responsibilities of self-determination in the desert, but the giving them freedom was the only means to that end. How can someone learn to be responsible until they are given something for which they are responsible? What a cruel mistake it would be to say to a child — "I will give you a book after you learn to read, or let you go in the water after you learn to swim." The only way a responsible handling of anything is learned is through actual participation, and we have much to learn here in relation to our children and the underdeveloped classes in society. We have tended to place freedom at the end rather than the

beginning of the maturing process, and this never works. There will be mistakes and failures and genuine suffering, to be sure, but how else does responsibility grow?

Over-arching all of Moses' relations to the nation of Israel was an incredible love, however, that bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things. His identification with them and sacrifice for them would have been "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal" had it not been for a profound affection for these people, warts and all. Moses' finest hour came when he came down from Sinai, with the Law, found these child-like former slaves worshipping a golden calf, threw down the pillars in rage, and got to the depth of his own frustration of having to deal with such problematic people. What parent has not had such moments of utter fury and frustration with the task of maturing another human being? But because Moses was so honest and so willing to feel all that he felt and not deny it, when the anger and frustration subsided, there beneath it was a love that would not go away. And we see him wearily climbing up the mountain again to intercede for these same folk. He offered for God to blot him out if necessary rather than give up on these children.

That is the hope finally, for any of us who is not yet completed, and I sometimes wonder, in relation to our own children, in relation to the poor and under-developed in our own country and in the world, do we have Moses' spirit and undying sense of love? If we do not — that is, those of us who by good fortune are the privileged of the earth, maturity can hardly be expected to come to them, and if it does not, woe unto the rest of us! The book of Exodus is a classic manual of what is involved in helping a people who were "no people" develop into responsible persons, and as parents and citizens of this world, we would do well to look there and learn before it is too late. Moses knew how to facilitate maturity. Is there a more needed human skill just now in our world?

Which brings me back to where all this started — this towering figure of a man who more than any other left his mark on Old Testament religion. What was the secret of Moses' greatness? How did he do what he did? I certainly do not have all the answers, but a place to begin would have to be with his unique understanding of God as the One Who worked in history, slowly through struggle and in his ability to love his kinfolds into maturity. What a legacy that continued to be for us all!