

THE STORY OF MOSES

Identity, Authority, Ability and Availability for Ministry



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We have finished our study on the Book of Genesis. At its end, we were given the story of Joseph, which served as the background story for the Book of Exodus. It provided the Israelites with the reason they ended up in Egypt in the first place, which was:

- That the slavery and eventual exodus was predicted long beforehand; having been revealed to Abraham (**Gen 15:13-16**)
- That the whole land of Canaan had been in fact promised to Abraham
- That they came to Egypt through God's providence and plan so they would not perish in the famine of Joseph's time
- That even the Egyptians owed their very survival and even wealth to the LORD, through Joseph

We begin the Book of Exodus years later when Joseph and all his brothers had already died. But God blessed the people of Israel so they multiplied in number and was viewed as a potential threat. And then a new king came to power, for whom Joseph and his merits meant nothing. And just like that, the memories of the merits of Joseph were forgotten in Egypt, and they started to persecute these foreigners out of fear. These were clearly stated in the Scriptures.

But that which was not explicitly stated, but was arguably of much greater importance, was not what the Egyptians remembered or had forgotten; but rather what the Israelites themselves remembered or had forgotten. And this was the very purpose the Mosaic books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) were written. They were written to remind the Israelite of their identity in God; especially of the legacy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as their Patriarchs. And this was of the utmost importance. There were two general strategies of oppression that had been consistently used throughout history. One strategy of oppression was to give them enough comfort and freedom so that they would not think of rebelling; the other one was to deprive them of freedom and identity so they would be too afraid to rebel. It seems that this new king was using the latter strategy and dealt with the Israelites harshly and ruthlessly (**Ex 1:9-14**). The Israelites cried out to God (**Ex 2:23-25**) and God heard their cry. But before He would rescue His people from bondage, He would first prepare their leader; Moses.

The Preparation of Moses

Moses' life was divided into three distinct periods of 40 years each. Now this is rather interesting; because the number forty in the Bible represents a period of testing or trial. It stands for a time when God tests His people so that they would meditate upon His precepts or planⁱ. Rev Stephen Tong described the periods of Moses' life this way:

1. The First Forty Years ("I am Something")
2. The Second Forty Years ("I am Nothing")
3. The Third Forty Years ("God is everything")

I think those descriptions were representative enough, so I would use them.

1. The First Forty Years ("I am Something")

Ever since he was young, Moses was already very special. **Exodus 2:2** says that Moses was a "*fine child*," and referring to the very same event **Acts 7:20** says that Moses was "*no ordinary child*." Ever since his birth, everyone could see that Moses was going to be someone great. And this impression would resonate in Moses' life for the next 40 years.

See how Luke in the Book of Acts described Moses' first 40 years. In that first forty years, Moses was described as one who was "*educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action*" (**7:22**).



But all this power and status did not get into Moses' head, and despite being brought up in the Egyptian palace, Moses retained his identity as a Hebrew. At the end of the 40 years, Luke recounted how Moses decided to visit "*his own people, the Israelites*" (7:23). More than that, Moses was apparently aware that he was called to become Israel's deliverer: "*Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them*" (Acts 7:25). And Moses jumped to a Hebrew slave's defense.

Now, let us step back and think if this was us. Moses was treated in every way as a prince of Egypt; and he had the privilege to be educated in all the wisdom of what was perhaps the Harvard and Oxford of his time. And Moses was also an accomplished person, as he was powerful not only in words but also in action. Now with all the paranoia the Egyptian was having of an Israelite revolt, the fact that Moses was educated this way would mean that he was completely regarded as an Egyptian royalty, not an Israelite, not even a commoner. So here you are, the prince of the most powerful nation of the world. He was genuinely respected - powerful in speech and action (not "no-action-talk-only"). Now if you want to headhunt Moses, what would you offer him? Position? Wealth? Honor? He was already on the top of the world!

So the fact that Moses retained the vision of rescuing the Israelite from Egypt speaks a great deal about the kind of person he was. Moses did not live for his own comfort or glory. He was ready to forsake his royal comfort and everything else to fight alongside the people of God! And the writer of Hebrews did give him that testimony: "*By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin*" (Heb 11:24-25)

So imagine his shock and confusion when even his own people did not receive or acknowledge him! He would be thrown into utter confusion when the very people he fought for did not reconfirm his calling. Imagine his disappointment: he a royal person was ready to sacrifice all, but was rejected and questioned by mere slaves! (Sidenote: This is typological to Jesus, the divine Savior who came to His people but His own received Him not – John 1:11).

Stripped of his sense of identity, Moses fled to the desert and thereby ending his confident reign as the prince of Egypt.

2. The Second Forty Years ("I am Nothing")

Moses was rejected at the time when he was most confident. But years living in a desert with no opportunity to put into practice all of the knowledge and abilities he acquired in Egypt humbled Moses. And that happened not for one or two months; not for forty months, but for forty whole years! Again, imagine if you were Moses. How would you deal with the disappointment? How would you deal with despair? Moses must have reasoned that he must have perceived his calling all wrong and cursed himself for such a silly (and costly) mistake.

But it was exactly at the climax of such consideration that the LORD choose to confirm Moses' calling. It was at Mount Sinai that Moses encountered the burning bush. It is extremely interesting to note that Moses was in the very same region that he will later wander for another 40 years with the Israelites. He learned how to live and survive in the wilderness! What he thought was 40 wasted years were actually used by God to prepare him for the next stage of ministry! How true is it that everything indeed work out for good for those who love Him and has been called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28).



But Moses' state of mind was at his lowest. And his response bear testimony to this:

Exodus	Question/ Statement	Represents	God's response
3:11	Who am I?	IDENTITY	I will be with you. Not who you are but who God is.
4:1	What if they do not believe? (Israel's initial reaction)	AUTHORITY	Miraculous signs given to authenticate the messenger and the message
4:10	I have never been eloquent	ABILITY	God's omnipotence, not your ability
4:13	Send someone else	AVAILABILITY	The only inexcusable objection. The LORD's anger burned against Moses.

The first question, who am I, revealed his *crisis of IDENTITY*. He was so zealous, so willing, so confident of his role; but that expectation came crushing down and costed him everything. Moses might have prayed to God for redemption from this fall from grace, perhaps in the first year or two of his exile; but after forty long years he would have given all hope or risk losing his sanity. God's response to Moses confidence was the revelation that he was nothing without God. God's calling depends on His sovereignty, His timing, His methodology, His will. And Moses needed to learn this. Indeed, as Jesus would teach much later, "*apart from Me you can do nothing*" (**John 15:5**). But then Moses needed to be reminded that he was nothing when and only when he stopped relying on God. The statement is not "I am nothing," but rather "I am nothing without God." But this time, God will be with him; so objection overruled.

The second question had to do with the Israelite's initial reaction – a question of AUTHORITY. Moses was not overreacting; he had proof. His initial attempt at rescue was met with that very sentiment "*who made you ruler and judge over us*" (**Ex 2:14**). Now the word "judge" can also be translated "delivererⁱⁱ." So that very skepticism was now presented to God in **Ex 4:1**.

It was a valid question, and God answered it as such. He gave Moses three miraculous signs to accompany him. Now this is the true purpose of signs in the Bible: it is to authenticate the messenger and therefore the message. Far from today's miracles, these are not given for a show-off; not for entertainment, not for man's fame, not to extort money. Signs follows God's messenger, in order that his message be heard. And because its purpose is that specific, the signs normally cease after its purpose is accomplished. Okay, another sidenote. The Book of Exodus defines for the very first time the purpose and nature of (1) miracles ("authentication of the messenger and the message") and (2) prophets (simply "speaking on behalf of God and only on His behalf". Aaron here was introduced as Moses' prophet). Both were for specific purposes, and cease when such purposes were accomplished. This will explain (as I have explained in the introductory session) why there are concentrations of miracles (sudden increase in the number and frequency of miracles) in the time of the Exodus; more than any other parts of the Bible; and also why there are concentrations of prophets during the times of the Kingdom (of Israel and Judah) after the reigns of David and Solomon. These are by no means random, and not something that Christians can place under their beck and call. God Himself will establish Moses' authority, and will authenticate his message. Once again, objection overruled.

The third was a statement of ABILITY. From one praised for being mighty in speech and action (**Acts 7:22**), for Moses to now think that he lacks eloquence (**Ex 4:10**) testified to how damaged his confidence had been. This had always been Moses' forte. The Moses of the palace was a man of confidence and ability. But it seemed like this was damaged beyond cure. And God did not reassure Moses of his ability. This was despite the fact that God did use all the education and training that Moses received in Egypt to manage the millions of people who traveled under his leadership (as will be shown next). God reminded Moses of His omnipotence, and of the fact that He was the Creator of giver of all talents. So, the conclusion was, "*Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say*" (**Ex 4:12**). And therefore, objection overruled.



The fourth statement was one of AVAILABILITY. It was clear at this point that all that Moses has said up to this point were mere excuses. The main issue is that he was no longer willing. He had been wronged and disappointed by the very people he cared about, and they had caused him to lose everything that he had. Now that he had paid for that mistake for 40 years, he wasn't going to march back into Egypt and offer himself once again. To love at all is to be vulnerable, said C.S. Lewis. And Moses wasn't ready to be vulnerable yet again. So Moses said *"please send someone else"* (**Ex 4:13**).

And this was the only statement that God did not find excusable. This statement was one void of hope, void of trust; and it embodied bitterness, disappointment, and an ultimate unwillingness to try again. So *"the LORD's anger burned against Moses"* (**Ex 4:14**). He sent Aaron along with Moses, but forced Moses to go anyway; not because Moses was someone great and that God needed him (that was the lesson God was teaching against), but that Moses needed that ministry to learn of God's providence and plan for him, and to fulfill the calling God had laid upon his life.

3. The Third Forty Years ("God is Everything")

God did use Moses' trainings and education in Egypt to organize, manage and lead the multitudes that went with him. This was by no means an easy task! **Numbers 1:45-46** reveals that there were 603,550 able-bodied men who could serve in the army when they left Egypt. That would be young men aged between 20 to 50 or 60 years old. Some scholars estimated that if we include everyone else (women, children and old men), they number around 2.5 million. Moses had to use all of his trainings and education, so those were not in vain and was part of God's plan and providence. See, this was God equipping Moses for the ministry to come. Neither the 40 years of education, nor the 40 years in exile were done in vain; despite Moses' haunting thoughts that it must be so. Everything had its purpose, and everything worked for good.

So even more significant than the training in Egypt, God was training Moses' mentality to receive and respond to harsh rejections. As he was later to face, in fact for the rest of his life, Moses would receive repeated rejections and threats from Pharaoh before he could lead the Israelite out of Egypt (we shall look at this next week). But for longer period than this, he was to receive and respond to the rejections and the grumblings of the Israelite themselves over the period of the next 40 years. Without the first forty, Moses would lack the ability to lead. Without the second forty, he would have lacked the mentality to put up with the people.

And this training was later proven to be absolutely necessary; for one obvious reason. Rescuing the Israelites out of Egypt did not take much time. But taking Egypt out of the Israelites presented the greatest challenge. They were stiff-necked people who grumbled at the first sight of discomfort. Even the harsh training and the 40 years in the desert was apparently not enough, because the people were so frustratingly disobedient. After so long, the Israelites were still grumbling the very same complaints they made as when they first left Egypt: *"if we only had died when our brothers fell before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grains or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"* (**Num 20:3-5**). The complaint was like an irritating resounding cymbal. "We were better off in Egypt, why did you bring us out? We don't appreciate what you did for us; it was not beneficial in any way." To listen to such grumbling for a time; to be patiently explaining and teaching about God's providence for a time would be understandable. And Moses did answer correctly the first time the complaint was brought to him: *"Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord"* (**Ex 16:8**). But this was 39 years after the exodus from Egypt! And what's more, Miriam, Moses' elder sister had just died. They picked such a time to quarrel with Moses, who had sacrificed everything to save these unworthy rebels. They did not even show the slightest sympathy that Moses is mourning the death of his sister (**Num 20:1**), who ministered to these people also. Moses had enough of these



people and said to them, *“listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?”* (20:10). No more Mr. Nice Guy.

Because of this, Moses made a huge mistake and struck the rock twice. And God’s verdict for him was this *“because you did not trust in Me enough to honor Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them”* (v. 12). In the heat of the moment, Moses gave way to weakness and let his emotions get the better of him. He forgot the lessons that God had been teaching him his whole life. That if he ministers as commanded by the LORD, then every rejection the people made was a rejection to God. And every success they were able to accomplish was to honor God. Moses realized this, for this was his commentary on what had happened *“These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the LORD and where He was proved holy among them”* (v. 13). They quareled with Moses and Aaron, but really, the one they were quarelling against was the LORD. For it was not Moses who brought them out of Egypt, but rather the LORD.

Most people who read this would feel that it is cruel of God to ban Moses from entering Canaan just because of one teeny weenie mistake. He had been a good leader for 40 years; and 1 year before the entrance, just because he hit a rock twice, he was banned from entering? How fair was that? Alright (1) the act of striking the rock twice was indicative that Moses acted without faith that God was in control the whole time. That God was leading the Israelite, not Moses; and therefore they were picking fights with God and not Moses. Moses started acting out of his own pride as a leader again and asked *“must we (Moses and Aaron) bring you water?”* (2) We need to understand that many things in the Old Testament were symbolic of Christ. They foreshadowed the work of Christ, just like the Tabernacle (Heb 8:1-6) and the Ceremonial Law (Heb 10:1-10). So, whilst unannounced, the rock was a shadow of Christ. Christ would be struck, He would suffer once and then He will give the waters of life. This is revealed in 1 Cor 10:4 *“they drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that Rock was Christ.”*

But that was not the end of Moses’ journey; otherwise it would have ended as a tragedy. If Moses had worked all his life and kept Canaan as his reward, that earlier verdict would destroy his world and once again turn him into the bitter and discouraged person who was devoid of hope. Yet what we will witness is the exact opposite. Moses would later write most of the Book of Deuteronomy; faithfully recounting every single thing that happened to the Israelite; reciting the laws they are to keep; advising for obedience and against disobedience. Now this does not resemble a bitter person. And just like David, who was forbidden to build the Temple for God would faithfully prepare that to be constructed under his son Solomon, Moses faithfully instructed Joshua as his successor who would lead the people into the promised land in his stead. See, for Moses, the ultimate reward was not the visible Canaan but rather the then invisible Christ. This was the full commentary the writer of Hebrews gave to Moses *“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel”* (Heb 11: 24-28). These verses show that Moses knew that the redemption from Egypt was not the end of the story. The problem of sin still persists, and God had revealed to Moses that not long after Moses’ death the people would once again prostitute themselves to the foreign gods (Deu 31:15-18). And since being disallowed from entering Canaan, Moses seemed to have search ever more intently for the will of God. And in Deuteronomy 18:15 he even predicted a Prophet like himself who is to come, who will truly lead the people out of the true Egypt – that is, the sinful world.

Moses ended his ministry as a faithful servant. And this was his testimony: *“Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to*



do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel” (Deu 34:10-12)

Conclusion

And if I were to choose the representing statement that would conclude Moses ministry, it would be these words he spoke to Joshua moments prior to his death: *“The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deu 31:8).*

This is a closing statement befitting of Moses’ life. That in spite of the circumstances around us, the LORD goes before us and completes the battle He sends us to fight. That when He calls, He Himself will be with us and never leave nor forsake us. And because of this very promise, we can stand firm in any situation; hopeless though it may seem, for we know that God is in absolute control to cause everything to work out for good in accordance to His divine purpose. We know that as we are in Him, that we shall be able to do everything through Christ who strengthens us.

And now, Christ left us with the very same promise. *“All AUTHORITY in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20).* Our IDENTITY has been given to us: We are God’s children through Christ. Our AUTHORITY is firm: We are sent by the Christ who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. Our ABILITY is given: Christ has promised to be with us even to the end of the age. The only real question, as it also was with Moses is: Are we giving our AVAILABILITY to the LORD? Would we say “send someone else” and incur God’s anger, or would we, like Isaiah, say, “here I am, LORD; send me.”

Soli Deo Gloria!

ⁱ Eg. The rain in Noah’s time lasted 40 days; Jesus was tried in the desert and fasted for 40 days; The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years; Moses was on the mountain receiving the law for 40 days and 40 nights; Jonah warned that 40 days later Niniveh would be destroyed; etc.

ⁱⁱ NIV Study Bible

