

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 27, 2017**

NO ORDINARY CHILD

August 27, 2017

Having completed our nearly two-year-long “Journey on the Romans Road,” this morning we begin a new sermon series on the life of Moses, one of the great heroes of faith in the Old Testament. For the first installment in this series, I invite you to turn in your Bible to the New Testament Book of Hebrews – Hebrews 11:23-29 – where we are given a brief summary of a few key events in the life of Moses.

Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

* * * * *

He was, as it says here in verse 23, “no ordinary child.” Stephen said essentially the same thing about him in his speech before the Jewish council in Jerusalem in Acts 7:20. It is true, of course, that he came into the world in the usual way. There was nothing unusual about his birth itself. But from the beginning his parents, Amram and Jochebed, sensed that there was something unusual about this child and that God planned to use him in some special way.

Though there was nothing particularly unusual about his birth, the circumstances into which he was born were anything but enviable. He was born into slavery in Egypt at a time when Egypt’s ruling Pharaoh had decreed that every baby boy born to a Hebrew (Jewish) mother was to be thrown into the Nile River and drowned. It was a population control measure, born of fear, instituted by the Pharaoh to prevent the population of the Hebrews from exploding any further, in order to keep the Hebrew people from becoming so numerous and powerful as to overthrow their Egyptian masters. It was not the same but similar in some ways to the one-child policy of China that has led to the abortion of millions of Chinese babies, mostly girls.

For the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it was, to borrow the words of Charles Dickens, “the worst of times” (*A Tale of Two Cities*). Life in Egypt was miserable for them. At the time of Moses’ birth, they were hated, oppressed, maligned, mistreated, and abused. They were slaves at the mercy of merciless taskmasters.

Unwilling to put their newborn son to death as required by law, Moses’ parents hid him for three months, and then carried out a carefully thought out plan to preserve his life. What they did, and how it worked out, is recorded for us in Exodus 2. They put him in a waterproof basket and placed the basket in the Nile very near where Pharaoh’s daughter went to bathe. Moses’ sister Miriam was watching nearby as the princess discovered her baby brother in the water. Coming out from her hiding place, Miriam volunteered to get one of the Hebrew women – namely, her mother Jochebed – to nurse the baby for Pharaoh’s daughter.

As it says in Hebrews 11:23, it took faith, and not just a little, for Amram and Jochebed to defy Pharaoh's decree and hide their newborn son. And it took a lot of faith to put baby Moses in the basket in the Nile, trusting God to preserve their son's life and accomplish His sovereign purposes in the life of this little baby. They trusted the future to the hands of God, not knowing how it would all work out. They did not know what tomorrow might hold, but they knew the One who holds tomorrow. Like Paul, they could say: "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him" for all time and eternity (2 Timothy 1:12).

It could not have been easy to hand over their son to be raised by a pagan Egyptian princess. Can you imagine doing something like that? But their courageous faith in God landed them in the "Faith Hall of Fame." Even if their names are not given here in Hebrews 11, we know who they are. And God certainly knows who they are.

A LIFE IN THREE STAGES

While the spotlight in verse 23 is on the faith of Moses' parents, verses 24-29 give us several more snapshots from the life of Moses where we see his faith at work. The first is in verses 24-26, which marks a decisive turning point in Moses' life. He had been raised in Pharaoh's royal palace as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was the recipient of the finest education available in Egypt. His education would have included science, mathematics, philosophy, architecture (things like how to build a pyramid), military tactics, and government. He was being groomed to rule. He was surrounded by wealth and power and prestige. He had everything going for him. He had it all. He had it made. Not only that, he even looked like Charlton Heston!

In his testimony in Acts 7, Stephen divides the life of Moses into three 40-year segments. His upbringing, royal training, and life of privilege are the things that marked the first 40 years of his life. He spent his second 40 years in the desert of Sinai in anonymity as a shepherd among the Midianites. During that time, he married Zipporah and fathered two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. God used those 40 years in the desert to train and prepare Moses for his life's true calling as the deliverer of God's people from their bondage in Egypt. The final stage of Moses' life covers the 40 years from his return to Egypt to the exodus from Egypt and his leadership of the nation of Israel during their wilderness years until his death just before they entered the Promised Land.

Dwight L. Moody said that "Moses spent his first 40 years thinking he was somebody. He spent his second 40 years learning he was a nobody. He spent his third 40 years discovering what God can do with a nobody" (Quoted in Swindoll, *Moses*, 20).

It is not likely that God will give any of us 120 years. So I hope it will not take any of us as long as it took Moses to learn what he needed to learn. What you need to know – what you need to remember and never forget – is that *you are somebody* in the eyes of God, and *you always will be*. Who you are in the eyes of the world is really of little or no account, and the sooner you learn that, the better it is for you and for everyone who knows you. You don't have to be a "somebody" in the eyes of the world. It's okay to be a "nobody." Because the life of Moses is proof that God can do remarkable things with a "nobody" who is sold out to

Him. If you are willing to be a “nobody” for Jesus and to serve His purposes in this world, even if it brings you no fame or acclaim or earthly rewards, God *will* use you. I’m sure of it. The question for each of us: Are you willing to be a “nobody” for Jesus? *Are you?* One thing is sure: You cannot glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and glorify yourself at the same time.

If you’re not there yet, don’t wait until you’re 80 (or older) to begin discovering what God can do with a “nobody” like you. Or me.

A FORK IN THE ROAD

Verse 24 tells us what happened when Moses came to a fateful fork in the road. You know baseball great Lawrence “Yogi” Berra’s famous saying: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” I’m not sure how helpful that is. But here was Moses at a crucial fork in the road, and which way he went would affect not only his own life but the future of the whole nation of Israel as well.

Look at the three verbs used in verses 24-26 to describe the actions of Moses at this fork in the road:

Verse 24: “(He) *refused* to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.”

Verse 25: “He *chose* to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”

Verse 26: “He *regarded* disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking forward to his reward.”

Each of these decisions, the Scripture says, Moses made by faith in the God of his ancestors – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of his parents Amram and Jochebed.

“Once to Every Man and Nation” is the title of a hymn taken from an anti-slavery poem (*The Present Crisis*) written by the 19th-century American poet James Russel Lowell. Here are the words of the first stanza of the hymn:

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
‘Twixt that darkness and that light.

When he had grown up, the Bible tells us, Moses came to a fork in the road where he faced “the moment to decide.” He could continue to live a life of privilege and pleasure as the adopted grandson of the Pharaoh. Or he could seek justice and liberty for his ancestral people, the oppressed people of Israel. He could find his identity in his place of prestige and

power in Egypt, or he could identify with the Hebrews in their mistreatment and suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. He could hold on to his position and privileges, or he could risk it all in an attempt to liberate the people of Israel. He came to a fork in the road where he had to decide which way to go.

The pleasures of sin referred to in verse 25 are, without a doubt, pleasurable. That is part of the problem with sin, isn't it? Temptations to sin would not be so powerful, they would not be so tempting, so attractive, if they were not so pleasurable. In the short term. But short-term pleasures can have lasting and painful consequences. Think of Israel's King David, whose affair with Bathsheba led to David's culpability in the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah and the birth of a son who died in infancy. The pleasures of sin, as enjoyable as they may be in the moment, are, as the Scripture says, "fleeting" (11:25). They do not last. And they are not worth it. Trying to find lasting fulfillment in life through the pursuit of pleasure, as Solomon concluded in Ecclesiastes, is a dead end street. It is all in vain. It is useless. It is doomed to fail.

Writer Ernest Hemingway is a famous and tragic example of this. Born in 1899, he was, as someone said, "the epitome of the 20th-century man." He lived in Paris as a young man, went big-game hunting on safaris in Africa, hunted grizzly bears in the American northwest, reported from Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. But then, at the age of 61, after having it all – wine, women, song, a distinguished literary career, Sunday afternoon bull fights in Spain, and more - Hemingway chose to end his life, leaving behind a note that said: "Life is one (blasted) thing after another."

It is true that not everyone who makes an idol of the pursuit of pleasure will end up like Hemingway. But you will end up disappointed. And disillusioned. Because the pursuit of pleasure is not what you and I were made for. Pleasure is fleeting, as Moses understood, as is the satisfaction it brings.

For his part, Moses chose something better. Something harder. Much harder. But better. He chose to turn his back on Egypt and to spend 40 years in the desert, during which time God prepared him for his life's mission, to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt and lead them to the land of God's promise.

In Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, the heroine is a beautiful and wealthy heiress named Portia. She has had no lack of suitors who wish to marry her. But her father's will stipulates that the suitor who selects the correct chest – one is made of gold, one of silver, and one of lead, each with a different inscription – will win Portia's hand in marriage. One suitor selects the chest made of gold, bearing the inscription: "Whoever chooses me shall gain what many men desire," thinking it refers to Portia as the object of their desire. Another selects the silver chest with its inscription: "Whoever chooses me shall get what he deserves," thinking himself deserving of Portia. Both, however, are wrong. Only Bassanio chooses the chest made of lead with its sobering inscription: "Whoever chooses me must give and hazard all that he has." Because he is willing to give everything he has for the sake of the one he loves, Bassanio wins the privilege of taking Portia as his wife.

Moses, we see, was willing to give up all the advantages of his life in Egypt and to go “all in” with his oppressed people, as a demonstration of his trust in and commitment to the true and living God. In the same way, the Lord Jesus calls us as His followers to place the pleasures and desires and things of this world on the altar of loving surrender and to “hazard” all things – to go “all in” for Him and His kingdom.

As one who has received God’s grace, which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will, are you ready to give and hazard all you have and to go all in for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom? Are you?

Is there a fork in the road in your life in which God is calling you to decide for Him? To choose His way? To turn away from the fleeting pleasures of sin? If so, now – today – is the moment to decide. Tomorrow the moment of opportunity may be gone.

OUT OF EGYPT

“By faith,” it says in verse 27, “(Moses) left Egypt.” We know he actually left Egypt twice. He left the first time after word got out that he had taken justice into his own hands and killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was abusing an Israelite slave. I doubt that he ever expected to go back to Egypt after that. But 40 years later, Moses returned to Egypt as God’s chosen deliverer of His people. And when he left Egypt the second time, it was with the entire nation of Israel, two million strong.

At the Lord’s direction, Moses instituted the Passover (11:28), which the Israelites observed on the night they left Egypt. Then, as they left Egypt with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit, the Lord miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could cross over on dry land. But when the Egyptian army tried to follow, the walls of water came crashing down on them and they all drowned (11:29).

* * * * *

Moses was no ordinary child. His life was anything but ordinary, as we will see in coming weeks. Really, though, he was just an ordinary man through whom God chose to do some extraordinary things. And, as great and important as he was in the history of God’s covenant people, there was and will always be one greater than Moses. In Hebrews 3 we are urged to fix our thoughts not on Moses, great as he was, but on Jesus. Moses is deserving of high honor, for he was “faithful as a servant in all God’s house,” the Scripture says (3:5). But Jesus is deserving of greater honor – of the greatest honor – because He is “faithful as a son over God’s house” (3:6), which He is building with the “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) of your life and my life and all who trust in Him.

In the end, as I’m sure Moses would agree, what really matters is who Jesus is, what you do with Him, and what you allow Him to do with you. Let’s go all in with Jesus. And for Jesus.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.