

Who was Moses in the Bible?

Moses is one of the most prominent figures in the Old Testament. While Abraham is called the “Father of the Faithful” and the recipient of God’s unconditional covenant of grace to His people, Moses was the man chosen to bring redemption to His people. God specifically chose Moses to lead the Israelites from captivity in Egypt to salvation in the Promised Land. Moses is also recognized as the mediator of the Old Covenant and is commonly referred to as the giver of the Law. Finally, Moses is the principal author of the Pentateuch, the foundational books of the entire Bible. Moses’ role in the Old Testament is a type and shadow of the role Jesus plays in the New Testament. As such, his life is definitely worth examining.

We first encounter Moses in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus. In chapter 1, we learn that, after the patriarch Joseph rescued his family from the great famine and situated them in the land of Goshen (in Egypt), the descendants of Abraham lived in peace for several generations until there rose to power in Egypt a pharaoh who “did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). This pharaoh subjugated the Hebrew people and used them as slaves for his massive building projects. Because God blessed the Hebrew people with rapid numeric growth, the Egyptians began to fear the increasing number of Jews living in their land. So, Pharaoh ordered the death of all male children born to Hebrew women (Exodus 1:22).

In Exodus 2, we see Moses’ mother attempting to save her child by placing him in a basket and putting it into the Nile. The basket was eventually found by Pharaoh’s daughter, and she adopted him as her own and raised him in the palace of the pharaoh himself. As Moses grew into adulthood, he began to empathize with the plight of his people, and upon witnessing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, Moses intervened and

killed the Egyptian. In another incident, Moses attempted to intervene in a dispute between two Hebrews, but one of the Hebrews rebuked Moses and sarcastically commented, “Are you going to kill me as you did the Egyptian?” (Exodus 2:14). Realizing that his criminal act was made known, Moses fled to the land of Midian where he again intervened—this time rescuing the daughters of Jethro from some bandits. In gratitude, Jethro (also called Reuel) granted his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage (Exodus 2:15–21). Moses lived in Midian for about forty years.

The next major incident in Moses’ life was his encounter with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3–4), where God called Moses to be the savior of His people. Despite his initial excuses and outright request that God send someone else, Moses agreed to obey God. God promised to send Aaron, Moses’ brother, along with him. The rest of the story is fairly well known. Moses and his brother, Aaron, go to Pharaoh in God’s name and demand that he let the people go to worship their God. Pharaoh stubbornly refuses, and ten plagues of God’s judgment fall upon the people and the land, the final plague being the slaying of the firstborn. Prior to this final plague, God commands Moses to institute the Passover, which is commemorative of God’s saving act in redeeming His people from bondage in Egypt.

After the exodus, Moses led the people to the edge of the Red Sea where God provided another saving miracle by parting the waters and allowing the Hebrews to pass to the other side while drowning the Egyptian army (Exodus 14). Moses brought the people to the foot of Mount Sinai where the Law was given and the Old Covenant established between God and the newly formed nation of Israel (Exodus 19–24).

The rest of the book of Exodus and the entire book of Leviticus take place while the

Israelites are encamped at the foot of Sinai. God gives Moses detailed instructions for the building of the tabernacle—a traveling tent of worship that could be assembled and disassembled for easy portability—and for making the utensils for worship, the priestly garb, and the ark of the covenant, symbolic of God's presence among His people as well as the place where the high priest would perform the annual atonement. God also gives Moses explicit instructions on how God is to be worshiped and guidelines for maintaining purity and holiness among the people. The book of Numbers sees the Israelites move from Sinai to the edge of the Promised Land, but they refuse to go in when ten out of twelve spies bring back a bad report about Israel's ability to take over the land. God condemns this generation of Jews to die in the wilderness for their disobedience and subjects them to forty years of wandering in the wilderness. By the end of the book of Numbers, the next generation of Israelites is back on the borders of the Promised Land and poised to trust God and take it by faith.

The book of Deuteronomy shows Moses giving several sermon-type speeches to the people, reminding them of God's saving power and faithfulness. He gives the second reading of the Law (Deuteronomy 5) and prepares this generation of Israelites to receive the promises of God. Moses himself is prohibited from entering the land because of his sin at Meribah (Numbers 20:10-13). At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' death is recorded (Deuteronomy 34). He climbed Mount Nebo and is allowed to look upon the Promised Land. Moses was 120 years old when he died, and the Bible records that his "eye was undimmed and his vigor unabated" (Deuteronomy 34:7). The Lord Himself buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6), and Joshua took over as leader of the people (Deuteronomy 34:9). Deuteronomy 34:10-12 says, "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."

The above is only a brief sketch of Moses' life and does not talk about his interactions with God, the manner in which he led the people, some of the specific ways in which he foreshadowed Jesus Christ, his centrality to the Jewish faith, his appearance at Jesus' transfiguration, and other details. But it does give us some framework of the man. So, now, what can we learn from Moses' life? Moses' life is generally broken down into three 40-year periods. The first is his life in the court of Pharaoh. As the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses would have had all the perks and privileges of a prince of Egypt. He was instructed "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). As the plight of the Hebrews began to disturb his soul, Moses took it upon himself to be the savior of his people. As Stephen says before the Jewish ruling council, "[Moses] supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand" (Acts 7:25). From this incident, we learn that Moses was a man of action as well as a man possessed of a hot temper and prone to rash actions. Did God want to save His people? Yes. Did God want to use Moses as His chosen instrument of salvation? Yes. But Moses, whether or not he was truly cognizant of his role in the salvation of the Hebrew people, acted rashly and impetuously. He tried to do in his timing what God wanted done in His timing. The lesson for us is obvious: we must be acutely aware of not only doing God's will, but doing God's will in His timing, not ours. As is the case with so many other biblical examples, when we attempt to do God's will in our timing, we make a bigger mess than originally existed.

Moses needed time to grow and mature and learn to be meek and humble before God, and this brings us to the next chapter in Moses' life, his 40 years in the land of Midian.

During this time, Moses learned the simple life of a shepherd, a husband, and a father. God took an impulsive and hot-tempered young man and began the process of molding and shaping him into the perfect instrument for God to use. What can we learn from this time in his life? If the first lesson is to wait on God's timing, the second lesson is to not be idle while we wait on God's timing. While the Bible doesn't spend a lot of time on the details of this part of Moses' life, it's not as if Moses were sitting idly by waiting for God's call. He spent the better part of 40 years learning the ways of a shepherd and supporting and raising a family. These are not trivial things! While we might long for the "mountain top" experiences with God, 99 percent of our lives is lived in the valley doing the mundane, day-to-day things that make up a life. We need to be living for God "in the valley" before He will enlist us into the battle. It is often in the seemingly trivial things of life that God trains and prepares us for His call in the next season.

Another thing we see from Moses during his time spent in Midian is that, when God finally did call him into service, Moses was resistant. The man of action early in his life, Moses, now 80 years old, became overly timid. When called to speak for God, Moses said he was "slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10). Some commentators believe that Moses may have had a speech impediment. Perhaps, but then it would be odd for Stephen to say Moses was "mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). Perhaps Moses just didn't want to go back into Egypt and fail again. This isn't an uncommon feeling. How many of us have tried to do something (whether or not it was for God) and failed, and then been hesitant to try again? There are two things Moses seemed to have overlooked. One was the obvious change that had occurred in his own life in the intervening 40 years. The other, and more important, change was that God would be with him. Moses failed at first not so much because he acted impulsively, but because he acted without God. Therefore, the lesson to

be learned here is that when you discern a clear call from God, step forward in faith, knowing that God goes with you! Do not be timid, but be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might (Ephesians 6:10).

The third and final chapter in Moses' life is the chapter that Scripture spends the most time chronicling, namely, his role in the redemption of Israel. Several lessons can be gleaned from this chapter of Moses' life as well. First is how to be an effective leader of people. Moses essentially had responsibility over two million Hebrew refugees. When things began to wear on him, his father-in-law, Jethro, suggested that he delegate responsibility to other faithful men, a lesson that many people in authority over others need to learn (Exodus 18). We also see a man who was dependent on the grace of God to help with his task. Moses was continually pleading on behalf of the people before God. If only all people in authority would petition God on behalf of those over whom they are in charge! Moses was keenly aware of the necessity of God's presence and even requested to see God's glory (Exodus 33). Moses knew that, apart from God, the exodus would be meaningless. It was God who made the Israelites distinct, and they needed Him most. Moses' life also teaches us the lesson that there are certain sins that will continue to haunt us throughout our lives. The same hot temper that got Moses into trouble in Egypt also got him into trouble during the wilderness wanderings. In the aforementioned incident at Meribah, Moses struck the rock in anger in order to provide water for the people. However, he didn't give God the glory, nor did he follow God's precise commands. Because of this, God forbade him from entering the Promised Land. In a similar manner, we all succumb to certain besetting sins which plague us all our days, sins that require us to be on constant alert.

These are just a handful of practical lessons that we can learn from Moses' life.

However, if we look at Moses' life in light of the overall panoply of Scripture, we see larger theological truths that fit into the story of redemption. In chapter 11 the author of Hebrews uses Moses as an example of faith. We learn that it was by faith that Moses refused the glories of Pharaoh's palace to identify with the plight of his people. The writer of Hebrews says, “[Moses] considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (Hebrews 11:26). Moses' life was one of faith, and we know that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Likewise, it is by faith that we, looking forward to heavenly riches, can endure temporal hardships in this lifetime (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

As mentioned earlier, we also know that Moses' life was typological of the life of Christ. Like Christ, Moses was the mediator of a covenant. Again, the author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to demonstrate this point (cf. Hebrews 3; 8-10). The Apostle Paul also makes the same points in 2 Corinthians 3. The difference is that the covenant that Moses mediated was temporal and conditional, whereas the covenant that Christ mediates is eternal and unconditional. Like Christ, Moses provided redemption for his people. Moses delivered the people of Israel out of slavery and bondage in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Christ delivers His people out of bondage and slavery to sin and condemnation and brings them to the Promised Land of eternal life on a renewed earth when Christ returns to consummate the kingdom He inaugurated at His first coming. Like Christ, Moses was a prophet to his people. Moses spoke the very words of God to the Israelites just as Christ did (John 17:8). Moses predicted that the Lord would raise up another prophet like him from among the people (Deuteronomy 18:15). Jesus and the early church taught and believed that Moses was speaking of Jesus when he wrote those words (cf. John 5:46, Acts 3:22, 7:37). In so many ways, Moses' life is a precursor to the life of Christ. As such, we can catch a glimpse of how God was working

His plan of redemption in the lives of faithful people throughout human history. This gives us hope that, just as God saved His people and gave them rest through the actions of Moses, so, too, will God save us and give us an eternal Sabbath rest in Christ, both now and in the life to come.

Finally, it is interesting to note that, even though Moses never set foot in the Promised Land during his lifetime, he was given an opportunity to enter the Promised Land after his death. On the mount of transfiguration, when Jesus gave His disciples a taste of His full glory, He was accompanied by two Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, who represented the Law and the Prophets. Moses is, this day, experiencing the true Sabbath rest in Christ that one day all Christians will share (Hebrews 4:9).