

## MOSES, A ROD, A ROCK, AND A REGRET

Presented by

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Several months ago in our Sunday-morning Bible class, Tyler and I began an intensive-yet-intriguing study titled, “A Journey through the Old Testament.” We began with the creation of the world in Genesis 1, and now have gotten as far as the Israelites’ conquest of the Promised Land. It is hard for us to believe that in the past few months we have covered more than **2,600 years** of human history—but we have!

Along the way, we have been introduced to all kinds of people. We have seen some who were very righteous (like Noah, whom the Bible calls “perfect in his generations,” Genesis 6:9). And we have seen some who were terribly wicked (like the idol-worshipping pagans in the land of Canaan). We have seen some individuals who were quite young (like 17-year-old Joseph who was sold into slavery by his envious brothers). And we have seen some who were incredibly old (like Methusaleh, who lived to be 969). We have seen some humans who loved God with all their hearts (like Abel, whose desire to serve God faithfully resulted in his being murdered). And we have seen some who did not believe in God at all (like the pharaoh who held the Israelites in slavery and asked mockingly, “Who is the Lord that I should hearken unto His voice and let Israel go? I know not the Lord, and moreover, I will not let the Israelites go,” Exodus 5:2). We have seen some folks who tried their best to obey God (like Abraham who, at God’s request, left his homeland and traveled toward a country whose name and location he did not even know). And we have seen some who were determined to do all they could to disobey God (like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, whom the Bible describes as being “exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord,” Genesis 13:13).

On more than one occasion, however, we have been introduced to people who really **wanted** to be obedient to God, and who tried their best to **be** faithful, yet who, due to their humanity, ended up sinning against the Lord. And more often than not, those individuals paid an unbelievably high price for their departure from God’s law. One such person was the man whom the Bible says in Numbers 12:3 was “the meekest man on the face of the earth”—**Moses**. Moses’ life began in a unique way as he was set adrift on the Nile River in Egypt in a tiny ark made of bulrushes in order to save him from a cruel pharaoh who had commanded that all Hebrew baby boys should be slain at birth. Plucked from obscurity as the son of a Hebrew slave, and subsequently adopted by pharaoh’s daughter, Moses grew up in what the Bible calls, “all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). At the age of forty, after killing an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave, Moses was forced to flee Egypt in order to save his own life. Forty years later when Moses was eighty, God called upon him to undertake an assignment that, in sheer size and scope, was second only to God’s previous instructions to Noah to build an ark so large that it could save human and animal life on Earth from perishing forever. God told Moses to take all of the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, and then lead them to the Promised Land of Canaan.

As Tyler and I studied what the Bible has to say about how Moses went about accomplishing that gargantuan task, we were nothing short of dumbfounded! With great excitement we learned how God used Moses to bring ten terrible plagues on Egypt—even going so far as to slay the firstborn child of every Egyptian household. With much astonishment we watched Moses lead an estimated **2,000,000 Israelites** out of Egypt and into a vast desert wilderness—wondering all the while how he would ever be able to feed them, clothe them, protect them, and eventually get them where they were supposed to be. And with hurting hearts we saw Moses endure the Israelites’ constant, never-ending cycle of complaining, bickering, and griping—day after day, week after week, and month after month.

It is safe to say that the more Tyler and I learned about the trials and tribulations that Moses endured for so long, the closer to him we felt, and the more sympathetic toward him we became. Time after time, Moses did exactly what God told him to do. Despite practically insurmountable odds, almost-unbearable conditions, and relentless criticism, Moses refused to give up. Instead, he trudged ever forward, knowing that his dedication and faithfulness eventually would lead him to the Promised Land.

Then, one day, the unthinkable happened: **Moses sinned against God!** As Tyler and I stared in disbelief at the large, full-color artist’s illustration of Moses’ ill-fated action on that day long ago at a place called Meribah, our hearts sank. We knew—from having watched God deal with sinners in many previous instances—that this very likely was not going to end well for Moses. And sure enough, it did not. Here is the sad story of what happened.

As the Israelites wandered in the desert, they began to run out of water. On one occasion, at a place known as Rephidim, God very clearly instructed Moses to take his shepherd’s rod and strike a rock in order to cause water to come forth from it. Moses obeyed—and water erupted from the rock, just as God had promised. But at Meribah, God told Moses just as clearly to **speak** to the rock, at which time it would yield water for the people. Moses was **so tired** of hearing the people complain. And he was **so exhausted** from all the trials and tribulations he had endured at their hands. As a result, in Numbers 20:10 we see Moses screaming in anger, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” And with that, Moses **struck the rock** with his rod—**not once, but twice!**

God did not punish the people for Moses’ disobedience to His command. **But He certainly did punish Moses!** Numbers 20:12 records God’s statement to Israel’s aged leader: “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, you therefore shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” And that was that. Moses—because of a momentary, unthinking act of anger on his part that led him to disobey God’s instructions—saw his golden opportunity to enter the Promised Land evaporate before his eyes. Many years later, the psalmist would say of Moses on this occasion that he had “rebelled against God’s Spirit” (Psalm 106:33). That single act of rebellion cost Moses everything for which he had worked for 120 years! Many years later, Moses—after having led the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years—was permitted by God to gaze over the Jordan and into the Promised Land. But he was not allowed to enter it. God kept His word—as He always does.

Tyler and I watched the visual aids on our classroom wall in stunned silence as we saw Moses dying alone on the top of Mount Nebo, and then being buried by God in a grave “where no man knows” (Deuteronomy 34:6). How many times had Moses repeatedly told the Israelites, “The Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy—**if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing the commandments that I command you today**” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)?

Yet in the end, Moses himself ended up disobeying the very commands of the Lord that he had so strongly urged the Israelites to keep. And what a horrible price he paid for his sinful act! Many years later the prophet Jeremiah asked the people of Judah on God’s behalf, “Will you not receive instruction to obey My words?” (Jeremiah 35:13). If Moses could have spoken to the people of Judah during Jeremiah’s day, he would have said, “Listen—and obey—because if you do not, God will judge you and punish you, just as He judged and punished me.”

And that is exactly what Moses is saying to each of us today. Tyler and I have learned many important lessons in our journey through the Old Testament. But none has been more important than what Moses himself said in Deuteronomy 8:6,11—“Keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.... Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes.” Amen, Moses. Amen.