

Heading for the Promised Land is Moses and around 3 million people. The book of Numbers is a diary of an eleven-day journey that took 40 years! Other parts of the Bible (like Exodus) tell the same story, but it is Numbers which explains why an eleven-day journey took forty years. Because the people kept leaving God's pathway. They just couldn't stick with what God asked them to do.

They took exit ramps and either did a 'resist and run' (Jonah) or a 'distort and deny' (Saul) when they should have done a 'tremble and trust' (Habakkuk). And it's hard to trust especially when the signs around you are not going well.... God appears to be busy or asks us to do things we don't want to do. That is the reason why many people go into a spiritual wilderness, because they discover they cannot manipulate God. "Well God, if I cannot have what I want and you don't appear to give it to me, then you cannot have me! I'm choosing to leave you!" And that's why the journey took 40 years!

But Numbers would never have happened except for a man by the name of Moses. Today, I just want us to make a brief pit stop and examine his remarkable story. Because there would not be one of us here who could not learn something from this man called Moses. You might be surprised by what we discover today about him. You see, most of us, when we hear about this man, go – 'well I'm not going to be a Moses, I'm not a leader, I'm never going to have to do any of the things he did – I just don't relate and there's not much I can see that might connect with me at all in this Moses man'.

Moses life is divided equally into three parts each of 40 years

1. 0-40 The Failed Life
2. 41-80 The Managed Life
3. 81-120 The Surrendered Life

A FAILED LIFE

The first 40 years started badly; he was abandoned at birth and set adrift in a little boat on the river because his mother was afraid for his life. You see, Pharaoh had adopted a birth control plan for these Israelites living in Egypt. They were prolific, so he decided to murder every male baby born. Surely this would make these Israelites think twice about having children when they had a 50/50 chance of death at birth. So, Moses was relinquished by his mother to the great Nile river at birth and was uplifted from the river by Pharaoh's daughter. A pact was made between the princess and Moses mother that she would nurse the baby and one day he would be taken into the royal palace. He lived there until age 40 in a very entitled and privileged life.

The early chapters of Exodus tell of a beautiful child. Josephus, the secular historian, records that people stared at Moses - there was something about him....a beauty, a bearing that others did not possess. He was educated in the best schools of the day in mathematics astronomy and chemistry, all of which the Egyptians were renown for. Acts 7:22 records that Moses was a man of power in words and deeds; he was able to communicate, articulate and motivate others. He learned these in the palace. All these skills God would use in his later life.

But Moses had a decision to make – he remembered his Jewish roots and something deep down in him started to churn. He struggled to bury this disconnect between the person he was by birth and the person he had become by adoption. Hebrews 11:24-26 tells us about this discovery. Would it be slavery or the pampered life of royalty? This choice was made with the full knowledge of its repercussions, it was made when his people were at their lowest ebb, not when things were going well but when all hope seemed gone, and it was made when the attractions of royal life were at their peak.

And friends, this same choice is still ours to be made today, to choose to follow Christ when it starts to cost. When it's not economically favourable, or when it's not socially desirable or good for your career path when it means having to speak out against something you know is wrong and you might be misunderstood. These kinds of issues don't go away because we swap cultures or generations.

One day, this disconnect in Moses erupted when he saw the brutality his people suffered, and he could no longer sit by and do nothing. His was a failure of a life because he lived a lie and then tried to rectify it but only made it worse. He killed a man – trying to identify with his people and do what he could, but it was nowhere near God's time or purposes for his people. This was Moses, the self-appointed messiah – but he lacked the deep character shaping that needed to take place. He got so much right – right assessment of what needed to happen, the right person even to do it, but the wrong time and the wrong way. It's a reminder to us who are leaders; that while we possess gifts of leadership, there is a component that only God can bring and a character that only comes with time.

A MANAGED LIFE Aged 40

The next 40 years of Moses' life was all about minimum hassle and maximum routine. You might know that during this time he lived in Midian, found his wife, had family and sorted his job as a shepherd. But this middle section of his life was unremarkable in many ways – Moses seems to have got most aspects of his life well managed. He has made the break from the palace and now finds open spaces and solitude to be his friend. It's my guess that during this time, God worked deeply on Moses' character. All the privilege of training and gifting he had was for a time set aside and the underside of Moses' life was rebuilt. But this managed kind of life is not where we are to stay, and God confronts him in the burning bush episode. This is totally about God and his timing. A call to discipleship came at age 80! Moses experiences disruptive moments of providence! And a vastly different Moses emerges from the 40 years of hiding. *Illustration of iceberg.*

A SURRENDERED LIFE Aged 80

There are days in our lives that start like any other, but by the end of them everything has changed. Moses had no idea this was the day or the moment. The sun rose like any other morning; the sheep grazed on the sparse slopes. Doing the routine, this was his life now. Gone seems to be the messiah-like, fiery passion to bring about the deliverance of his enslaved people. And God turns up in the form of a burning fire and this conversation takes place. (Exodus 3) "I am the God of the past (Abraham Isaac and Jacob), the God of the present (I have seen the suffering of my people) and the God of the future (I am sending you to deliver them)." Now Moses says, "Who me?" Now Moses

eliminates himself from the task. "I'm not capable, send someone else, I cannot speak! What shall I say?" God says, "Say the I am has sent you!"

Now, this is what I want to say to you today because here is where we can all connect with Moses story...what had changed in Moses? From this would-be, messiah-like leader to the 'send someone else' leader? I think there were three challenges that Moses faced during this third trimester of his life. I want you to note something here, that some of the deepest challenges in Moses life came during this so-called surrendered period – this was where he worked out what God had been working inside him for so many years. We can sometimes think that once we get through the training and preparation period that its all application and action...how far from the truth this is in reality!

His **Woundedness** – Moses has come to see that inside him, he is a mixture (like us all) of past life experiences, scars and memories. Some of the things that have happened to him have affected him and as he has reflected on them, he has become the person he is now because of them. But some of the wounds he has experienced have shaped him. It is precisely through these wounds he has learned humility and brokenness. He was tested in this – Numbers 11 When the people complain Moses *kept to the course* Numbers 11:27 Not to be sidetracked by the people's fickleness or complaining – he knows his destination and he knows the God who is leading him there.

His **Waywardness** – Moses is still far from fully sorted. Like us, he still has a short fuse and we will see that this, in fact, cost him dearly later in his life. But he knows it because he has got to know himself and his humanity. How easily he can be led by his emotions. He was tested in this...Numbers 20:10 sorely tested and he didn't handle it well – *but he kept on going!* Moses was still far from under full control – the underside of his emotions could still rise up and they did, which resulted in him being eliminated from leading the people into the land!

His **Weaknesses** – Moses now sees not his strengths so much as his inadequacies. He has learned that to lead you don't have to be strong, you have to be weak and let God's strength flow through you. To lead you don't have to have all the answers, you have to be obedient. To lead you don't have to put yourself at the front, God does that – you just have to be willing! And there is a component that God brings to the mix that is more important than any human thing we can do or say.... his presence! I will be with you!

So Moses gathers his few things together and heads south to Egypt to obey the voice of God in his life and he retraces the steps he had made 40 years earlier. In his hand was the shepherds crook (stick) which became the symbol of the 40 years when God changed the inside of him...and his surrendered life to God.

What do we know about Moses?

He was humble – strength under control (meek) Numbers 12:3 when others criticised him – he stayed true to what God called him to do.

He was faithful – faithful as a servant over what God asked him to do- Hebrews 3:5

He was like no other man – whom God used in powerful ways - Duet 34:10

He was the friend of God Exodus 33:11 (Hebrew lit – means the 'part that turns') whom God spoke to face to face in the tent of meeting.

He was the only man God buried Duet 34:5-7 with no grave or monument so that nobody could make an idol out of him.

Being crafty as we are – we hear a message like this and go – that's great for Moses, but I have no leadership aspirations! I'm no Moses, nor is there two and a half million people looking for a journey through the sand near here! But we miss the message entirely if we think this way.

So here was the difference – and perhaps a message for us today. Does our penchant for comfort and familiarity lure us into exit ramps from what God wants in our lives?

Is the larger story God is writing through us a passionate player in our lives or will we perhaps become fixated on our own little stories and another exit ramp of personal preference?

Moses life says many things to us but none more strongly than someone who walks his days with an awareness of God's calling and presence in his life...and who refuses to turn to the left or the right.

He knows to stay the course and keep going, when like Habakkuk – the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit on vine, olive tree fails, and the field bear no crop. When the livestock don't reproduce, and all looks bleak – yet will I rejoice in the Lord. I will stay the course; I will stand at my watchtower (tremble and trust) and see what God will do.

Yes, our **choices in the ordinary days of our lives determine the destiny of our lives.**

If you have ever visited the beautiful north Canterbury town of Hanmer Springs, you will know there is only one road in and out. And that road goes over the deep canyon of the Waiau River. The bridge is the only way across – its strong, it's not that wide, but it enables you to get across. When the bridge was built, they cut the footings out of rock where the bridge is anchored either side. If the footings are unstable, you don't want to find that out when you are halfway across! So, with us, the entry and exit points of our spiritual lives need to be strong, to enable us to span the journey. Here's the question – for many people they can get out of 'Egypt' but can they get into 'Promised Land'? Or will you, like those in this story, perish in the wilderness by taking exit ramps of your choosing?

Do you feel like taking exit ramps at times in your life? I do – they are very appealing, especially in the desert wilderness. Starting next week, we are going to look at **eight of them** in the book of Numbers. Everything we have done so far is to set the stage for the journey to the promised land. Are you ready – to embark upon the journey to life and deal with the distractions that might appeal to you from the side-lines?