

Preparation for Service

Acts 7: 17-37

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Vv. 17 - 22

In reading this passage I have in mind to outline the way God took in preparing His servant Moses for the work to which He ultimately called him. In this chapter we are told the life-time of Moses was comprised of three periods of forty years, each period having its particular bearing on his formation in view of the service he so faithfully rendered for God. We may learn much from these records of how God ordered his birth, rearing, education and testing, till at last, fully fitted, he entered into that service with and for God. It is doubtful if any other servant had such an experience as Moses, yet one feels assured there are certain marks in this record which outline for us the dealings of God with all who serve Him, great and small, and it is these marks I want to point out in a simple way as an encouragement to us all.

At v. 17 we begin our study at the point where the people are seen in Egypt waiting for the implementation of the promise which God had made to Abraham. The time was drawing near for their exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the land which God had promised to Abraham in sovereign grace, and their position at that time is pretty much like ours to-day. A promise has been left us of entering into our heavenly part at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It has led with some to the hope that as this event draws nigh a wonderful revival will take place amongst those who look for Him and that the church will rise in prominence till the Lord takes us home. But do we not rather see from such places as the addresses to the seven assemblies that the nearer we are to that moment, the more need we have to hold fast His word and not deny His name, as though the numbers of those who do so will get less and less. Like Israel here, we may find our liberties more and more curtailed before we are taken out of this world. The conflict between light and darkness goes on unceasingly and the enemy will do his best to end all testimony to Christ in this world, hence the need of men of God like Moses who may be used of God for His glory and the blessing of His people. We can be assured that God will take care of His own interests and this record shows how wonderfully He moves to carry out His will in spite of the efforts of the enemy. It surely should be the desire of all to be used of God while we wait for our Lord.

It might have been thought that as the time drew near for the fulfilment of this promise the children of Israel would be growing in might and power and prominence but instead of their national status increasing, they are seen at what is perhaps the lowest point of their national history. God had allowed them to become bondslaves under the tyranny of this king who knew not Joseph. So much were they at his mercy apparently, that he determined to exterminate them by ordering all the male

children to be thrown into the river.

It is just here the history of Moses is brought before us "In which time Moses was born," v. 20. Externally, he could not have been born at a worse time for he was born a **bondslave**. Far better to have come into the world when Joseph was in power in Egypt or at a later date when David was winning his victories. So we might have thought, but God is behind all these movements, ever working His sovereign will for His own glory and our blessing. Have we ever wished we had been born in a different day? Do we sigh for the great days of the early brethren and wish we had been in the world then? Let us rather accept willingly the ordering of our God and ask, "Why has He brought me into this world to-day?" It is recorded of David that, "after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep." Beloved, we cannot serve a generation who have lived before our time or a generation who live after we are gone. It is to-day, in which time we have been born, that God has brought us into this world to serve Him. Repining after another day, one which we may judge to be better, will not get us anywhere but rather will it prompt us to give up. Why quarrel with the ways of God? Let us rather assure ourselves, we can serve God better today than any other day and that is why we are here. Two things marked the birth of Moses. Socially, he was born a **bondslave** but in the ordering of God he was born a pure **Kohathite**. So it has been with all of us. Whatever our social standing is in the family into which we were born, we were all born into this world as potential servants of God. The family into which we were born, the upbringing and education we have received, have all been skilfully arranged by our God having in view that particular service we were destined to accomplish for Him. How different some of our circumstances would have been had we had the ordering of them, but God has not made any mistake. We know that Kohathites were born such, and it is worthy of note that from the moment we were born into this world God was ordering our circumstances in view of His service. The Levites were numbered from a month old (Numbers 3: 15). They **waited** upon their service at twenty-five years old (Numbers 8: 24). Then they **entered into** their service at thirty years old (Numbers 4: 3). We see this progress clearly in the history of the great Apostle Paul. "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb," "And called me by His grace" — waiting upon his service. "That I might preach him among the heathen," — entering into his service. How clearly we see here the ordering of God in the time and birth of Saul of Tarsus having in view the wonderful ministry he was destined to carry out for His glory. So we are assured that in our much smaller way, God has ordered our circumstances in view of serving Him to-day.

We next read, "And was fair to God" (margin). Let us be encouraged by this. However despised any one of us may appear in the eyes of this world, as potential servants of God we are fair in His eyes. Again, Moses certainly had an advantage in having such pious parents who feared God more than they feared the king, and nourished up this child for three months instead of casting him into the river. Both his father and mother were of the tribe of Kohath — the tribe who were destined to guard the holy vessels of the tabernacle — and perhaps something of that character comes to light here in the way they guarded the very one who was to bring that tabernacle into evidence. Hence Moses was nourished up in his father's house for three months. He could not have learned much in the first three months of his life but, providentially, he was humanly preserved by pious parents. While the history given to us in Exodus puts this to the credit of his mother we learn, both here and in Hebrews 11, that the father was fully committed too. They held on to him until the time came when they could hide him no longer, and they were obliged to cast him out, but this was done in a way which safeguarded this valuable young life. Perhaps Moses had cried too much, for the first thing we read of him doing was he "wept." Carefully this pious woman laid that precious ark "in the flags by the river's brink." Had she plunged him into the stream, she may never have seen him again. Let us who are parents take note of this lest we plunge our children into the stream of this world and lose them so far as serving God is concerned.

We now behold a wonderful move in the providential ways of God. The daughter of Pharaoh is guided by God to this very spot and, most wonderfully, her heart is so moved by this babe who can only weep, that she determines to bring him up for herself. How came it that such a thought as this entered into her heart? Can we doubt that God put the desire there? Oh! beloved, how our God has been looking after us when we could do nothing nor knew anything about ourselves so far as His service was concerned. Take another wonderful instance. When Daniel and his three companions purposed in their **hearts** that they would not defile themselves with the king's meat, God saw their hearts and put His hand on another man's **heart**, to wit, the prince who had charge of them and the result was they were enabled to carry out their resolve. So here we have the heart of Pharaoh's daughter moved towards this babe and she determined to bring him up for herself. "For herself" was a mistake for she did not know she had been given the privilege of bringing him up for God. Probably, she was the only person in the land of Egypt who would dare do such a thing. Who else would have dared to act against the commandment of the king? Yet another interesting matter seems to come to light here. God was to need a man who could read and write and what chance had any of the bondslaves of the children of Israel to obtain an education like this? All the Egyptians cared to teach them was to make bricks. Writing perhaps had not got far beyond the royal courts in the days when Moses lived in this world. So to Pharaoh's court he goes in this unusual but divinely ordered way, that he may receive the necessary education to fit him for his great work for God. He exchanges **bondslavery** for **royalty**, destined to be a king, yet not king in Egypt but "king in Jeshurun" (Deut. 33: 5).

It is evident that Moses had been born with the necessary aptitude to imbibe this teaching for we read of him, "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds" v. 22. The ability to progress like this was not doubt given him of God though it took many years to bring it into evidence. Few of us have had an education like this but then, very few are needed for such great work. It is not a matter of secular education here, but ability for the particular service God has ordained for us. Men like J.N.D. and G.V.W. had the privilege of such an education and how they devoted it to the service of their Master. Most of us have had a lesser education than such men but let us be assured we have all had the necessary education for the work we are called to do. All is right if in the hands of God for it matters not how clever we are naturally, if God is not using us our efforts will be in vain. Nor does it matter how simple we may be, if God uses us we will effect His will. The point is, Are we using what God has given us to serve Him? Thus this great scholar and leader is prepared and reared in the court of Pharaoh in view of that particular service he would one day render for God.

This then is the history given us here of the first forty years of the life of Moses. Born at the bottom of the social scale, yet in the ordering of God, born into the family which had the greatest service to render for God of all the servants in the Old Testament, for of this family came the priesthood and those who carried the holy vessels of the Tabernacle. Providentially reared up in the court of the greatest king of his day, he stepped up and up acquiring skill and knowledge which one day would be all at the service of God. Such were the ways of God with his servant Moses and such we are assured are His ways with those who seek to serve Him in this world. Forty years to form the vessel and we may later see how a further forty years formed the man who was in the vessel for we are persuaded that these two things are distinct though impossible to separate.

Vv. 23-36

Resuming our consideration of the history of Moses, we come now to the second period of his life in the next forty years, where we see the man himself being formed to use the vessel which God had providentially prepared in Egypt.

In v. 23 we are told that the desire came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel. In all the forty years he had been moving in the court of Pharaoh, it now appears that he never forgot that those despised slaves were his brethren. One may imagine him looking round on the glitter of that court and those who moved there and thinking in his heart, "these are not my brethren." This thought must have persisted with him till a moment came when he left the court and set off to visit his brethren. We find that the word **visit** is from the same root as the word episcopacy. It seems as though he was overlooking his "see," the future sphere of his service. Nor can we doubt by v. 25 that by this time he knew it was so. By some means he knew that God was going to deliver His people and use him to do it but as yet Moses is just too early and perhaps a little too self confident, when he ought to have been very much dependent upon God to undertake such a stupendous task.

Coming amongst his brethren he observed an Egyptian smiting an Israelite and it seems that he came to a decision at once to defend that Israelite. He declared himself by laying hold of that Egyptian and slaying him. No doubt now as to which side he is on, and perhaps a demonstration that he was mighty in deeds (v. 22). So much for his first move as a deliverer.

Visiting his brethren the following day, a vastly different circumstance confronts him — an Israelite smiting an Israelite. We are told (v. 25) that Moses had supposed his brethren would have known that "God by his hand was giving them deliverance" (J.N.D.) but they knew it not. We have only to look a little further to find God was not doing any such thing. The time had not yet come for that. Moses made two mistakes. He thought his brethren knew something which in fact they did not know and he acted before God's time. The falseness of the position comes to light through these two brethren striving together. Appealing to them on the ground that they were brethren, he is rudely told he had no right to interfere. As usual, it was the wrong-doer who objected to him, demanding to know who had appointed him as a ruler over them. Moreover, when the man exposed his deed of the previous day in slaying the Egyptian, he is thoroughly alarmed and he fled. The erstwhile deliverer is now a fugitive. No doubt he was faced with a very severe test. An Egyptian smiting an Israelite was easy of solution, but an Israelite smiting an Israelite was beyond him, whatever their cause of striving was. How many of us possess the grace and wisdom to deal with cases like this? It led to his first recorded failure and sad to say almost similar circumstances led to his **last**. Smiting the rock when he ought to have spoken to it cost him his place in the land and once again it was his brethren striving at the water of Meribah — Strife. Who is sufficient for these things?

So for the next forty years he is a stranger in the land of Midian of which very little account is given us in this passage. We can only surmise the disappointment and regret that oftentimes must have filled his heart. Those servants of the Lord who have passed through a period of this description will understand his feelings. We do at least learn the effect of it when we see this man once mighty in his words and in his deeds, boldly laying hold of an Egyptian and slaying him ere he came into Midian, **now** so humble as to protest to God that he is incapable of either speaking or acting as a deliverer. What a change, yet **now** how useful to God with such an attitude of mind.

As he turns aside to see the bush burning he hears for the first time the voice of the Lord. What a difference it must make to anyone to have to do personally and directly with God. He is assured it is his God — the God of his fathers — and this once bold man trembles in the presence of God. Isaiah is used of God to tell us at a later date that this is the kind of man to whom God will look — one who trembles at His word (Isa. 66: 2). After forty years from boldness to trembling, and Moses is now fitted to go forth in the service of God. But God first says to him "I . . . am come down to deliver them" and "I will **send** thee." We can be sure that when God uses a man who trembles at His word mighty things will happen.

So Moses, commissioned now by God returns to Egypt and begins again the work he had attempted forty years before but this time God is using him, whereas before he seemed prepared to do it himself. Note the difference now. He does not return as a **ruler**, and a **judge** but as a **ruler** and a **deliverer** (v. 35). Nor does he think this time he will do it by his own hand. He knows now that it will be by the hand of God in the power of His angel. At his first attempt he slew one Egyptian and partly delivered one Israelite. How long would he have taken to deliver the nation by his own efforts, slaying one Egyptian at a time and delivering one Israelite?

This time he is used to slay all the mighty men of Egypt with one blow and free the whole mighty host of Israel. So much for the difference between one moving by his own power and moving by the power of God. Success is bound to attend the latter. Failure and disappointment the former. So for the next forty years of his life he completed one of the most successful terms of service for God recorded in the Scriptures. Forty years learning the wisdom of Egypt is preparation as a vessel. Forty years learning himself as the man in the vessel and forty years learning much of the wonderful resources of God who used the man and the vessel for His own glory and the blessing of His people. As another has said, "Forty years learning to be something. Forty years learning to be nothing. Forty years learning that God was everything." Born a bondsman and a servant to Pharaoh, he ended as the servant of God (Joshua 1: 2).