

Heroes of History: Moses

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 17 September 2006

The greatest of them all

Let's start with a question: Apart from Jesus Christ, who was the single most influential human being who has ever lived? We're in a series looking at some of the heroes of history. Who was the greatest of them all? Have you seen *The Ten Commandments*? What about Moses? He is the pivotal character in the Old Testament. In human terms, he founded the people of Israel as a nation. He led them to freedom. He established their system of worship. He organised their form of government. He gave them their law. Today the three major world religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – all cite Moses as the one who brought them their divinely inspired moral codes. This is what the writer, Elie Wiesel, says of Moses:

Moses, the man who changed the course of history all by himself; his emergence became the decisive turning point. After him, nothing was the same again ... His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, ... his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and his organisational genius ... his efforts to reconcile the law with compassion, authority with integrity – no individual, ever, anywhere, accomplished so much for so many people in so many different domains. His influence is boundless, it reverberates beyond time."

There's a good case for arguing that, outside Jesus, Moses is the most influential human being in history. What set him apart? What made him so great? What I want to do this morning is zoom in on one particular episode in the life of Moses – the moment when he faced his greatest crisis, his greatest challenge – and see what we can learn. So turn to Exodus chapter 32. Just a bit of background here. Moses has led the people of Israel out of Egypt, defeating the most powerful empire in the ancient world. He's led his people through the Red Sea. He's led them through the desert to Mount Sinai, where they enter into a covenant with God, to be his people, to worship him alone. Moses has gone up the mountain to receive from God's own hand the stone tablets outlining this covenant relationship. Let's read Exodus 32:1-10.

This is a defining moment in the history of Israel, and of the world. The text goes on to explain – and contrast – how Moses and his brother Aaron respond to this crisis. What I want to do is compare their responses in order to see the difference between effective and ineffective leadership – to see what it takes to have a profoundly positive influence on those around us.

People of influence embrace responsibility

The first difference is that effective leaders embrace responsibility. Ineffective leaders evade it. Look at v.7. God says to Moses: "Go down, because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt." Now if I were Moses, I'd have wanted to say something like: "They're not my people. This whole thing wasn't my idea, remember? I was perfectly happy tending sheep in the wilderness." But what does Moses do? He agrees to accept the burden of leading these people. He prays for them: "God, don't destroy your people." Verse 12: "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.'" In effect, Moses is saying, "God, if you now destroy your own people, how will that make you look? For the sake of your name, your honour, spare them." What happens? Verse 14: "Then the Lord *relented* and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." The Lord *relented* or, literally, "*repented*." Moses got God to change his mind. This is astonishing. And confusing. Kurt Vonnegut, a sceptic, once said, "If God is all-wise, as you say he is, doesn't he know already what is best? And if he is all-good, won't he do it *whether we pray or not*?" So why pray? Do our prayers really make a difference? Yes, they do. If the history of Israel – and the example of Moses – is anything to go by, it would seem that God wants to work in partnership with people, and has chosen to achieve his redemptive purposes in this world through us, through our actions, through our prayers. Our prayers make a difference. We have a responsibility to pray. And Moses does.

But compare his response with that of Aaron. When Moses comes down the mountain, he has a wee chat with his little brother. In v.21 he says to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" Watch how Aaron responds. "Do not be angry, *my lord*. You know how prone these people are to evil." Now a quick show of hands here: How many of you had a brother when you were growing up? How many of you ever got into a fight? How many of you ever called him "my Lord" to cool him off? Lorraine and I get into conflict sometimes. How often do you think she calls me "my Lord"? It just doesn't happen. But it does here because Aaron is trying to wriggle out of any responsibility for what's happened. He goes on to say in v.23: "They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us' ... So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the

fire, and out came this calf!" This is classic. I threw their gold into the fire to stop them from being so materialistic, and this darn calf just came hopping right out. Wasn't my fault.

What a difference it would have made if, right from the beginning, Aaron had take responsibility for this situation. So here's my first question: Is there an area in your life for which you have not been taking appropriate responsibility? Maybe it's at home. We've got a child who expresses anger inappropriately. I could say to my wife, "You realise she gets that from your side of the family. This is your fault. I can't do anything about it." The better approach would be to say, "As a parent, I will take seriously my responsibility to pray for our little girl. And to work at this until I find a way, with God's help, to teach her the right way to act." Maybe it's at work or school where you need to embrace responsibility. Maybe it's here, in this faith community. Occasionally I hear the odd person criticise some aspect of our life together. You may have the odd complaint yourself. Let me ask you something: What are you doing about it? What could you do about it? It makes a huge difference when someone simply says, "I will take responsibility. I will do what needs to be done. I will serve." Effective leaders – people who influence their world for good – embrace responsibility. Ineffective leaders don't.

People of influence emphasise core values

That's the first contrast. Here's the second: Effective leaders – people of influence – continually emphasise core values. Ineffective leaders just let them slide. The whole point of the exodus, the whole reason God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, was to create a people who would be committed to him, devoted to him – so that through them he might show the world what he is like. But notice what happens at the beginning of this chapter. Moses has been gone for about forty days. The people start to get nervous, or bored, and their commitment to God starts to fade and decay. Verse 1 says, "they *gathered* around Aaron" – or literally "they gathered *against* Aaron" – and demand that he make them an idol, in direct violation of their covenant relationship with God. The point is that core values have a tendency to decay over time. It's called entropy. It happens in every society, every organisation, every family.

Let me give you an example. Before Lorraine and I got married – while we were courting – I explained to her that I liked to stay fit. Physical exercise was a core value of mine. Lorraine agreed. And so while we were courting, we occasionally went running together. Then we got married. In seven years of marriage guess how many times we've gone running together. Not once. A couple of months back, I decided I needed to resuscitate my fitness. I needed a goal. So I decided I'd do a half iron man at the end of the year. I went on the Internet, found a 20-week training programme, printed it off, and got started. The first day you had to cycle for 90 minutes. It's a while since I'd been on my bike, so I did 60 minutes. That was enough. The second day of the programme you had to run for 45 minutes. I managed 30. I was still getting started. Day three you had to swim 2.5 km. Now, you need to realise, I've never swum close to 2.5 km in my whole life. And this is the first week – the lightest week – in a twenty-week training programme. What did I do? I have yet to do day three... Values have a way of decaying over time. It's called entropy. Ineffective leaders – ineffective people – allow those values to die. Like Aaron. He follows the path of least resistance, with tragic consequences.

But contrast that with Moses. When he comes down the mountain, what does he do? In v.19 it says, "When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain." It's not that he's lost his temper. He's communicating to his people in dramatic terms that they have broken their promises to God. Then in v.20 it says, "[H]e took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it." Then the text says Moses stands at the entrance to the camp and cries out, "If you're on the Lord's side, come to me." The Levites gather around him. And Moses issues them with battle orders. He gets them to take decisive action in order to lift up values that have started to decay. This is effective leadership. Because entropy happens. Everywhere.

You see it in churches. One of the first values to decay in any church is evangelism. I've seen churches that once had a deep commitment to reach their generation but they're now focusing almost entirely on themselves. They've forgotten about those who are far from God. It's tragic. That's why I'm so excited about the Big Night In, and our youth community, and our children's ministry. There are people in this church who are saying, "We won't let this value die. We're going to do whatever it takes to reach the next generation with the good news that God loves them." Entropy can happen in families. Maybe you're in a family or a marriage and you realise you're not spending time together like you used to. The conversation has become superficial. You never read the Bible or pray together any more. Perhaps God is calling you today to have a conversation with your spouse, or to call a little meeting with your family, to say, "Here are some values that we prize. We're going to recommit to them. We're going to declare one

night a week a family night. We're going to develop some rituals or traditions." As you reflect on the people with whom you live, the places where you work, are there core values that you know God is calling you to emphasise again?

People of influence express high levels of commitment

The third feature of effective leaders is that they express a high level of commitment to people, but a low need for approval. They don't live their life to get approval from people. They live to serve people. Ineffective leaders are the other way round. Look at Aaron. His need for approval is high. He doesn't stand up to the people because he wants their approval. But when he's pulled up for his behaviour, what does he do? He blames the people to get himself off the hook. He's not really devoted to them at all.

But look at Moses. He's willing to stand up to the people and earn their disapproval because he wants what's best for them. He's genuinely committed to them. Look at v.9. God says to Moses, "I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." Think about that. Put yourself in Moses' sandals. Doesn't that have a certain appeal? No more learning to put up with this whining, complaining, obstinate, stiff-necked people. No more, "We want to go back to Egypt." No more, "We're sick of manna. Can't we have something else to eat?" No more, "Are we there yet?" But Moses says, "God, don't destroy them." Then in v.30 he says to the people, "You have committed a great sin." He's dead honest with them. "But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses goes back to the Lord and says this, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." This is amazing. Moses is saying, "If you won't forgive them, then let me die in their place. Spare them by turning your anger on me instead." He's willing to go to the very end of the line for these whining, complaining, obstinate, stiff-necked people. Now let me ask you this question: Do you have any whining, complaining, obstinate, stiff-necked people in your life? You don't have to raise your hands or point and say, "Yes, in fact, I brought mine along with me right here." Just think about the people in your life, the people in this church. How far are you willing to go for them? What are you willing to do for them? What's God asking you to do for them?

The interesting thing with this story is that God doesn't actually accept Moses' offer to be a substitute because Moses doesn't qualify. Sacrifices in the Old Testament had to be perfect and unblemished, and Moses is not himself morally perfect. But by this one incredible, sacrificial gesture, he prefigures another hero of history, who did live a perfect life, who was worthy of bearing the guilt of the people, and who did offer himself up as a sacrifice once and for all to make atonement for sin. And because God accepted that sacrifice, we are forgiven. And we can partner with him in changing history. One life at a time.

Questions

1. What does the name Moses mean? What is the significance?
2. Read Exodus 20:4-5. What is idolatry? Why do you think God forbids it? How do you think our society engages in idolatry today?
3. Kurt Vonnegut said, "If God is all-wise, doesn't he know already what is best? And if he is all-good, won't he do it *whether we pray or not?*" In contrast, Andrew Murray wrote, "Prayer is the power by which that comes to pass which otherwise would not take place." What do you think?
4. Do you tend to embrace or evade responsibility? How might God be calling you to take appropriate responsibility for an aspect of your life?
5. In Exodus 32:19-20,25-29, Moses takes drastic action against his people. It almost seems barbaric, especially if three thousand Israelites are killed at random, irrespective of their own personal involvement in this idolatry. How would you defend Moses? Does Numbers 5:16-31 help?
6. Are you aware of any core values in your life, or family, or church that have been slipping? What decisive action could you take to emphasise them again?
7. Do you express a high level of commitment to people, or a high need for approval? Do you have any whining, complaining, obstinate, stiff-necked people in your life? What's God asking you to do for them?

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