

## Nothing Worth Doing Can Be Accomplished in a Single Lifetime

<sup>NRS</sup> **Deuteronomy 34:1** Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan,<sup>2</sup> all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea,<sup>3</sup> the Negeb, and the Plain-- that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees-- as far as Zoar.<sup>4</sup> The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."<sup>5</sup> Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command.<sup>6</sup> He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.<sup>7</sup> Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.<sup>8</sup> The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.<sup>9</sup> Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Harriet Beecher Stowe once said: "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone." Her friend and poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote something similar: "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, none are sadder than these: 'It might have been!'"

Unfinished business. Things left undone. Few things trouble us more.

This was certainly true of Moses. You know the story of Moses isn't an easy one. His life was threatened before he could even walk. And when he did grow up, he was never quite sure who he was- was he Hebrew? Was he Egyptian? And when he killed that man who was beating those Hebrews and buried his body in the sand- well Moses' life was in danger once again. And then, when he finally finds some peace and quiet- when he finally finds a little corner of the world where no one was trying to kill him; God comes to him and calls him to go back to Egypt, to go back into the lion's den. And

amazingly Moses does. And he even manages to help free his people, to help form the people as they left Egypt to find the land promised to them by God. And you would think that the heavy lifting would have been over, right? I mean they escaped the Egyptian army, one of the most powerful armies of the day. What could be worse than that? But it turns out that being lost and hungry and thirsty day after day after day- well it takes its toll on you. And sometimes you'd almost rather be dead than to keep on keepin' on. And so probably the hardest part of Moses' life was leading the people through the wilderness, when instead of thanking him, pretty much all he heard day after day was a litany of complaining. Last week we heard that great line from Numbers- "Why have you taken us out here into the desert to die? Weren't there graves in Egypt? And what about food? There's nothing to eat. And the food we do have- we don't like it."

Now last week I was a little hard on Moses. I said he went up Mt. Sinai and didn't leave the people any idea where he was going or when he'd be back. And we talked about how that really would cause most folks to get a little anxious. But this week, when I think about all that Moses went through, I think the amazing thing isn't that he left and didn't leave an itinerary for when he was coming back- the amazing this is that he came back at all.

But of course he did. And you just keep, well you just keep hoping that at some point things are going to go better, easier for Moses. You just keep hoping that he's going to catch a break somehow.

But then you get to the last book in the Torah, the Pentateuch, the book of Deuteronomy. And we find ourselves having traveled with Abraham to the promised

land, having gone into Egypt with Joseph and his brothers, having escaped Egypt with Moses, having made it through the wilderness with him, until now, in Deuteronomy, we are in Moab, we are right on the edge of the promised land. And you think this is going to be great- Moses is finally going to get his reward. He's going to have one of those little ceremonial golden shovels they give CEO's when they break ground on some project- and he's going to cross the Jordan and dig a little dirt and smile for the cameras, and the people are finally going to be home. They are finally going to be safe.

But here in Deuteronomy 34, at the very end of the book, standing on the very edge of the promised land...well, Moses dies. He dies. In the end he doesn't make it in. He doesn't cross the finish line. He doesn't pass go and collect his \$200 dollars. He is close but no cigar.

Oh, he sees it- he sees the promised land. God takes him up on top of Mount Nebo and shows him the hills and the valleys of the land below, this fertile jewel in the middle of arid barrenness. He sees it, but he does not cross the Jordan.

And it seems so unfair to me. It seems so unfair Moses is allowed to see into the land, but never to cross over to it. Unfair that he has to put up with those people all that way, and then, at the very end- this last step in the journey, this last act is left undone, his great work unfinished.

C.S. Lewis knew what this was like. You all know C.S. Lewis from books like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*. He's easily one of the most brilliant theologians of the century- not only incredibly intelligent but having the gift of

being able to communicate his insights with regular people, sadly rare amongst theologians.

In my opinion, though, his greatness didn't come from his incredibly brilliant mind, but from his heart- a heart rent apart by grief. Some of you know his story. Lewis was a famous curmudgeon of a bachelor- he lived with his brother in Oxford where he taught English and Medieval history. And for almost all his life this little world was all he really ever knew. He didn't travel; he didn't date. He taught. He wrote. He lived and breathed ideas. But then, when he was 54 years old, 54, he met the love of his life, an American woman named Joy Gresham. They were an unlikely pair. She grew up as a Jew, and then became an Atheist, and then found herself moved by Lewis' writings. They struck up a correspondence. And over the course of who knows how many letters, they began to bare their souls to one another- and they fell in love. And it wasn't easy. It was complicated. Joy was married. She was married to an angry, alcoholic writer named William Gresham, and with him they had two sons. And, tragically, Joy was sick. She was terribly sick with cancer.

When they were finally decided to marry, Joy was in the hospital. Because she was divorced Lewis could hardly find a priest who would do it. Finally, he persuaded one of his friends to help, and on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1956 in Wingfield Hospital Lewis' friend, The Rev. Peter Bide disobeyed church orders and blessed their love.

Joy recovered from that stay, and she and Lewis had four amazing years together. Four incredible but short years together. And in 1960 her cancer came back and took her life.

To go 54 years and not to know of the tenderness of love. And then when he finally meets this woman who becomes entirely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and to have such a little time together before it was all taken away. Well there were so many words left unsaid. So many things left undone. So much that wasn't finished.

Lewis writes that for him it was like God slamming a door shut right in his face. He writes: "I can't settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time." (A Grief Observed, p. 33) "And where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms [of my grief]. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him...if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become." (p. 6)

It was as if both of them had a brief glimpse into the beloved country, the promised, longed for land, but they were not quite allowed to cross over and enter into it. And it was like a door being shut.

But then sometimes it's the absolute opposite. Sometimes, it's not that you want more of a relationship- but less. You want to be done with someone; finished. You want to move on with your life, and there are times when you almost believe you've done this- but then you realize you haven't really crossed over any Jordan at all- that you're really still in this intermediate place, this troubled place.

I've talked before about my father- how he was an angry man. A man who wasn't able to control himself. How he left when I was 10. I didn't see him much after this, he didn't call or write. And I was always glad about that- relieved in a way. After I saw him for my high school graduation I never heard from him at all until two summers when I led my grandfather's memorial service, and then last summer for my grandmother.

I believe I've made it something of a mission in my life to kind of rise above how I grew up, to not allow any of that to drag me down. I have no doubt this is part of what drove me to work so hard in school, what attracted me to a place like Princeton. There was a part of me that wanted to prove to myself that I really could just shut the door on him and the chaos of my childhood and just be done with all that business.

And you know, up until we had Will, I felt like I had done this. I felt like I really had closed the door on all of that, that I had crossed over from all that wilderness into a safer and certainly more stable promised land.

But when Will was born, and then when Ella was born, and I feel it again with our third on the way- I find being a father causes me to think unwelcome thoughts about my own father again. Only now it's not that I'm not mad or hurt about the things he did, it's not. No, what troubles me now is that when I look into their little faces, and I see how fragile they are, how much care they need, I know that no matter what could possibly happen in my life- there is nothing that will keep me from giving them everything I can. Nothing. But what I realize now, in a way I never knew before actually being a father, is that somehow my own father was able to look into my face, into my brother's face, and not feel that way.

Now I don't want to make this sound more tragic than it is. I'm ok. I'm not losing sleep or anything. But these thoughts are unwelcome visitors- reminders to me that I'm not really done with all that, and, I probably never will be entirely.

No, sometimes as much as we would like to be done with the past, finished with the past, the past isn't always so ready to be done with us. And relationships we may feel are complete- sometimes turns out to be very much unfinished and incomplete. Sometimes far from being in the longed for promised land, we find ourselves back on the dang edge again- maybe able to see, to conceive of a time when these wounds are healed over, but not quite able to experience it just yet.

You know, I started out this week really hating this passage. As I read it and read it, it felt so cruel to me, it seemed that God was being so mean here- like God was teasing Moses. Like Moses gets to *see* into the promised land, but he's not allowed to *experience* it- which is just cruel.

It reminded me of the Greek story of Tantalus- do you know that one? Tantalus crosses Zeus- not a good idea. And Zeus punishes Tantalus in one of the worst ways possible. Tantalus is bound up by chains in a shallow pond of cool, clean water. And on the edge of the pond is a beautiful fruit tree- just so full of fruit. And everything is ok at first- you think this is punishment? This isn't so bad. You have your water and food; it's a nice view. But then Tantalus bends down to drink- and the way the chains are, he can make his way to the water, but he can't actually drink. No matter how hard he tries. So, then he goes for the fruit, thinking maybe that will go better. And he leans towards the tree, but those chains- well no matter how hard he strains and pulls at them, he can get

right up to the fruit- he can smell the sweet succulent fragrance of it...but he can't quite pull one off to eat it. He is literally so close, but yet so far. It's where our word 'tantalize' comes from.

This is what the story seemed like to me- it seemed like a kind of tragedy. After all that work, after all that faithfulness, because of some misstep here or there God in the end not only keeps Moses from crossing over, but God twists the knife a little bit and tantalizes Moses with seeing the land he so desperately wants to enter, but cannot.

But I discovered that not everyone reads the story like this. In fact most don't. Most hear this story as a bit of kindness on God's part- like he could have just let Moses die there but instead shares this last moment with him. And one scholar in particular helped me see it in an entirely new light. This guy is an expert on ancient law, and he hears something very interesting here. In the ancient world conducting a real estate transaction was no easy thing. They didn't have good maps. They didn't have survey instruments. So, what you would do if you wanted to buy and sell land- you would climb up to the highest place you could find. And both parties, the seller and the buyer would stand together and they would point out the various landmarks and agree together on the boundaries of the land. They would look upon all the geographical features, the mountains, the hills, the valleys- and they would agree together where the lines would be drawn. (Ian Cairns, from his commentary on Deuteronomy in *Word and Presence*, p. 304)

This guy says you know what's happening here? God isn't being cruel to Moses. God is pouring salt in his wounds and tantalizing him. God is taking Moses up there to literally renew his promise to Moses. As Moses is at the very end of his life, God is

going over the promise with Moses again, as a way of saying to him that yes, maybe he won't be able to enter, but his work was not in vain- his people would indeed enter into the longed for land, and God would be with them.

Lewis also experienced a grace like this, as well. After his experience of his life being like a locked door, he did what we all have to do after death. He kept on going. Now his grief never really ended. In fact he said he just had to pick a point to stop writing, because he started to realize his grief would never actually end- it would just change. But it did change- and mostly it changed for the better. Near the end of A Grief Observed he writes: "When I lay my questions before God now, I still get no answer. But now it seems a rather special sort of 'no answer'. It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand.'" (p. 69)

You know, I started out hearing Moses' story as a tragedy, but I'm left hearing it as being more the way life is. You know- no matter who we are, how great we are, there will always be loose ends in our lives. There will always be words left unsaid, and relationships not entirely mended in our lifetime. And this isn't always tragic. In fact sometimes it's simply because sometimes what we are trying to do with these lives of ours, the difference we're trying to make to those around us- well sometimes it's far larger and far more difficult than even we ourselves dare dream.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime...Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history...and nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.”

Nothing worth doing is completed in lifetime, friends. Nothing. There will always be parts of us left undone. So, for now, heal what you can. Grieve what you cannot. And, when you are given a glimpse of the longed for lands of promise- feast your eyes on them; see as much as you can see, even unto Judah and as far as the Western sea. **Amen.**