

## Nothing Worth Doing Is Completed in Our Lifetime

**Deuteronomy 34:1-9** <sup>1</sup>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.

Well, we’ve come to the end of the road for Moses. Literally. We started when he was born and placed into an ark. We saw him as he grew up in the house of Pharaoh and when he saw that Egyptian beating a Hebrew, killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand and fled. We saw him in the wilderness with the burning bush, and then leading the people out of Egypt. And we followed him in the wilderness, when time after time the people whined and bellyached and he provided for them, and when time after time God was ready to give up on the people and head to Florida, and Moses argued with God and kept telling God he can’t give up.

And now we’ve come to the end. And it’s an end that’s puzzled people for thousands of years. Because when we finally get to the end of the journey, after Moses has led the people out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness for forty years- he winds up with them on the threshold of his unthinkable goal, Canaan, the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. He winds up right at the VERY edge- so close they can see into the land, into every corner. So close they can taste the milk and smell the honey.

But.

But, he's not allowed in. Moses is not allowed to step even one foot into the land. Moses can look, but he can't touch. And it just kills me. It seems so unfair, so tantalizing.

Do you know, our word 'tantalize'- it comes from the Greek myth of Tantalus. Tantalus. Some poets said Tantalus once was invited by Zeus to dine at his very own table. The gods dined on ambrosia, which in Greek literally means immortality. It was so named for anyone who took this heavenly stuff became immortal as well. Well, when Zeus wasn't looking Tantalus pocketed some of it and tried to take it back to the people. Some poets say this was his crime.

Others say once Tantalus invited all of the gods over to his place. You know, just chillaxin' with Athena and Mars in the crib, that kind of thing. Only Tantalus hated the gods, and for a joke, he served his own son Pelops as the main dish. Nobody ate it except Demeter, who was distracted over losing her daughter Persephone to Pluto, the god of the underworld. And the gods were not amused. Some of the poets say THIS is what Tantalus did.

Whatever version you like, all the poets agree on his punishment. Tantalus was condemned to forever stand in a pool of water beneath the boughs of a tree hanging with the most amazing fruit. But. Every time Tantalus would reach up to pluck one of those ripe, mouth watering pieces of fruit- the limbs would lift away from him. And whenever he became thirsty and tried to bend down to drink the water, the water would rush away from him. He was condemned to forever be so close- but so very far.

Tantalus was tantalized. The Greeks considered it one of the worst, most cruel punishments imaginable.

Well, is THIS what happened to Moses at the end? Was God punishing him, tantalizing him- I'll let you come right up to the edge, to the border of the promised land, but across that border you will never cross? Is this what's happening? I mean that just seems TERRIBLE.

And yet, nearly everyone agrees that Moses is being punished- although, as usual, there's very little agreement about the exact reason.

The story where Moses stumbles? It takes place in the book of numbers- Numbers Chapter 20. And it's a slightly familiar story- we heard a version of it in Exodus a few weeks ago. The Israelites are again in Meribah, only this time Miriam, Moses' sister has just died, and everyone has settled down for a bit to mourn her. Only, just like last time when they were here, there's no water. And just like last time, the people gather together to protest against Moses. And just like always- they complain. I love it. They say to Moses if only we had died when our brothers and sisters died earlier! Did you just want to kill us Moses? Is that why you brought us out here, Moses- to kill us? As if they were happy in Egypt and Moses marched them all out their at gunpoint. Their whining continues- they say it's terrible there- no grain, no figs, no grapevines, and my personal favorite- no pomegranates. Oh yes, please- I simply can't make it another day if I don't have my pomegranates.

And Moses and Aaron leave the people and head over to the tent- the place where God's presence sometimes dwells. And they fall down on their faces before it- I think this less an act of worship than it is just utter exhaustion from the marathon of whining. And God again speaks to Moses and tells him to gather everyone around the famous rock- the one that he struck with his staff the last time they were there to get water. Only this time, God says, Moses isn't supposed

to strike the rock- Moses is supposed to talk to it. “Speak to the rock, before the eyes of the people,” God rumbles at Moses, “and water will pour forth from it.” (Numbers 20:8).

Only this isn't what Moses does. Not by a long shot. Moses gathers everyone together. He approaches that rock. And then with a flash of anger, Moses yells at them saying: “Listen you rebels- must we bring you water from this rock?” And then instead of speaking to the rock- Moses strikes it again with his staff. Twice!

Now the good news is water flows out of the rock and the people are happy. But the bad news, at least for Moses and Aaron, is God isn't happy. God says to Moses and Aaron- because of this act, because of this moment, quote: “they will not bring the congregation into the land God is giving them.”

Moses will get so close, but he will always remain yet so far.

Now the people of God have argued over the meaning of this for millennia.

A lot of folks say Moses' problem is that he hit the rock instead of spoke to it, and that by doing this he was being disobedient or showing a lack of faith. And a lack of faith- well this is just unacceptable on the part of a prophet and he should feel lucky that being tantalized was all that God did to him.

Other folks say it wasn't so much that he hit it- but that he hit it twice. Had he just struck the rock, God wouldn't have been pleased, but it might have been acceptable. But that second strike- that was just over the top. It was Moses mocking God. And again, these folks say Moses should feel lucky he wasn't punished worse.

And still others say the real problem wasn't about the rock at all- it was about what he said. “Listen you rebels, must *we* bring water out of this rock?” Some people hear that as Moses

taking the credit for the action and failing to honor God. Any religious who begins to think that it's all about them instead of God even for a second becomes a dangerous leader. And one scholar I read believed that not only was Moses not giving God enough credit, but he was being an abusive leader on top of it- being so angry when the people really did need water.

And all of these ideas, all of these ways of reading the text, even though they are different, they do have one thing in common- they all agree that Moses is being punished when after this moment God tells him he'll be leading the people to the promised land, but he will not be leading them into it. They all agree that what God is doing is something like benching the starting quarterback in the last minutes of the fourth quarter when the game is really close, simply because he made a mistake.

And I want to be honest with you- this is definitely how most people read the story. If you feel like this makes sense- you are on solid ground.

But personally? I prefer this weird little minority opinion, a way of reading this story that comes mainly from Jewish interpreters. And these folks say that what's happening here when God is saying Moses isn't going to lead the people into the land- it isn't a punishment, it isn't God prescribing punishment, it's God describing who Moses really is. What's happening here isn't God prescribing punishment- it's God describing the person Moses is or has come to be in that moment, a person, a leader, who, though great, is human and limited.

These readers say the most important part of the Meribah story in Numbers is to remember that it is the second time Moses has been there. The first time Moses and people go there is right after they cross the sea. Everyone is fresh and young and vital, and they can conquer the world- only they get thirsty. And they complain. And God tells Moses to strike that

rock, and in spite of being afraid (I mean what if you hit that thing and nothing comes out) Moses strikes that rock. It's just a great moment about doing the thing you're afraid to do but know you have to do.

But in Numbers 20, the second time, the people have been wandering for a LOOOOONG time. It's been decades. Indeed, the first generation of the Israelites has mostly died out- hence Miriam's death. Moses has become an old, old man. And even though they find themselves in the same geographic place- it's a new day. It's a new generation. And God rightly sees that what worked twenty, thirty years ago- that's not what's going to work today. And so God tells Moses, hey, yeah, last time you struck this rock, but today you have to speak to it. This is what the people need. But Moses? Well, Moses, as great as he is, and he is great- he was human. And he had limits. And in this case he just couldn't bring himself to do this new thing. This old dog, this tired old dog just couldn't or didn't want to learn any new tricks.

And these interpreters say- so when God sees this as says Moses, you aren't going to be leading the people into the promised land, it isn't with eyes blazing and finger pointed. It's not, "Where do you think you're going? YOU aren't going to be leading the people into the land!" No, it's with a kind of sadness, a kind of realistic assessment of what Moses is honestly capable of. It's, "Moses, for all that you've done, as great as you are- you are going to get the people so close, but you, dear friend, you aren't going to have what it takes to lead them as they take that next, faithful step across the Jordan."

And don't we know what this is like? Don't we know what this is like? Every single one of us had parents that, God love 'em, most of them did there very best. And while some of there 'bests' really weren't very good, and left deep wounds for some of us, even the best parents,

even the best were not able to give us everything we needed. Even the best mom didn't have all the words. Even the best dad had moments where he fell short.

And it's the same with our own little ones. When they grow up and leave- the God's honest truth is we will not have given them everything they need to go out into the world. We will have failed them, and let them down, time after time after time. This last week, I was downstairs doing homework with Will, and Melis was up working on the girls. And Ella was just having one of those terrible, terrible nights. And she was just screaming, "I hate you!" over and over. And Melis was just calmly saying back, "Yes, I know, and I'm sorry- but I love you anyway." And when she came down we just looked at each other. Ella finally calmed down, but at least in those moments, there's just nothing to do. And the stakes only get higher as they get older. At least that's what you all kindly tell me.

And this is also true of our spouses, our partners. If you live in partnership with another or have at some point in your life- you know that this other person, as amazing, as wonderful, as great as they are. Even in the best relationship, this other person simply isn't going to be able to give everything it is that you want and need. Oh, I think the most painful myth we live with is this belief that when you find yourself bored or lonely with your partner- that this means there's something wrong. Something wrong with them or wrong with you or wrong with the relationship. People. People. True love does not mean you will never be bored. True love does not mean you will never be lonely. Our partners, even if they are incredible, will never fill every need. They don't complete us. They were never meant to. Where our partners stop is where both God and golf begin.

Moses, as amazing as he was, simply didn't have everything the people needed. He was able to take them far- so far. But when it came to the very end- he was able to see into the land, he was able to get his mind around it. But that old dog just didn't have what the people needed to take that next faithful step. And that wasn't a punishment of Moses. He wasn't being tantalized when he caught that glimpse into Canaan. That actually had to delight him. No, he couldn't make it in, because he had served faithfully in his season, and given everything he had- but the time had come for others to take over.

The good news of this story in Deuteronomy this morning, the good news to me isn't so much that the people made it to the edge of the land and could see in. The good news was that Joshua rises up. Moses may not have had what the people needed at that moment- but Joshua did. At least for a season.

I'll leave you with a quote from one of the greatest theologians and pastors of the last generation, Reinhold Neibuhr. He wrote: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."

You know the great cathedrals of Europe were built over generations. The Cologne Cathedral, considered one of the finest examples of high gothic architecture was started in 1248. When Luther tacked up his 95 theses in 1517, nearly 300 years later, the cathedral still had

wooden boards for a roof. Each generation added their work, their care to the effort- but it took them all to finish it.

What are you working on, what are you a part of that will continue long after you have died? What is it that you may glimpse partially, but will never, not in your lifetime, see entirely completed? If you've never asked this question- today is a great day to start. **Amen.**