

So Near and Yet So Far

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[0 : 00] And you may like to have open the Bibles from the pews at page 168. And today we're concluding our sermon series on Deuteronomy, which we've done in bits and pieces during the year, and with the final chapter of Deuteronomy, chapter 34.

So let's pray. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word and shine its light into our hearts that we may follow you and serve you all our days.

And we pray this for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen. In the offices of the ABC and no doubt other main media organisations, they have files and files of obituaries written of people who are not dead. That is, they're ready to go just in case such people die, so that the obituary can arrive in the next day's paper or be on the news on a current affairs programme or whatever it is quickly.

And no doubt there are people who keep these from time to time more or less up to date. So no doubt all the main media organisations had obituaries of Kim Beasley Sr.

[1 : 10] all ready to go once he died overnight a couple of days ago. And I'm sure that in the obituary files of the ABC, there are obituaries of John Howard and Kevin Rudd and Steve Braxton.

Well, you never know. If you're lucky, there might be one of you too. And if you're like Mark Twain, you could write to them and tell them, I think it's a bit premature to have an obituary of me. I'm not yet dead.

Of course, the reason why all these obituaries are there is because people like to praise famous people and people like to read about famous lives as well. And in the pages of the Old Testament, there is none so famous, I think, than Moses.

He's probably, humanly speaking, the great person of the Old Testament. And Deuteronomy 34 is a little bit of an epitaph of praise of Moses.

It's not really quite like that, and it's certainly not like what we read these days of epitaphs or eulogies of famous people. But Moses was great. He was born probably a bit before 1500 BC.

[2 : 17] As a baby, remember, he was dramatically rescued from the Nile where he'd been placed by his mother in a little basket at the time when Hebrew babies were being killed. So he'd sort of been abandoned by his mother, a little bit like the pumpkin child that was left at Southern Cross Station, abandoned by her father in that case.

And he was rescued, brought up in the palace of Pharaoh. So it's not often that you read of people who are brought up in some palace life. At the age of 40, he fled to another country.

Because he committed murder. He didn't go to Greece like Mokbel, but to Midian. So, you know, again, a sort of interesting angle on an amazing life.

There he married the daughter of a priest of Midian. And at the age of about 80, more or less, he was confronted by a burning bush that actually wasn't burning, but it was a light with flame and heard God's voice calling him to lead his people out from oppression and slavery back in Egypt. And so he goes back to the land where he committed murder and from which he'd fled. And there, through an amazing sequence of signs and wonders, plagues, Moses confronted Pharaoh and eventually yielding the concession of Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

[3 : 42] And then, of course, he did this great engineering feat, not quite a tunnel or a bridge over the Red Sea, but rather simply, let's part the water, go straight through. And so the people, under Moses' leadership, go through the Red Sea into the Sinai Peninsula.

There, at Mount Sinai, atop Mount Sinai, Moses is given the laws of the Ten Commandments on stone that God's own finger had written.

He was with God on top of the mountain, heard God's voice, was given all the other laws which he later wrote and relayed back to Israel, as we've seen in recent months in Deuteronomy as well.

It was this Moses who interceded successfully for Israel when they committed idolatry, when they built a golden calf and worshipped it. It was this Moses who met with God in the tent of meeting or tabernacle and came out with his face shining having met with God on those occasions.

It was this Moses who led Israel for 40 years in the wilderness through the times of deprivation and testing, during which, under Moses' leadership, the people were fed with manna from heaven, through which, and in Moses' leadership, water came from a rock.

[4 : 57] It was this Moses who brought military victory over Sion, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, right near the end of his life. And it is this Moses now, in this chapter, at the age of 120, has led the people back to the border of the promised land, and he's now ascended from the plains of Moab on top of Mount Nebo, looking over the north end of the Dead Sea across to Jericho and looking out across to the promised land.

Some of us will be there in a bit over a month's time on top of Mount Nebo in what is modern-day Jordan. It was a place I went to some years ago when I was doing my PhD on Deuteronomy and stood where, supposedly, Moses had stood.

His burial place is unknown. If we get a bit of time, we might do a bit of digging in a few weeks, see if we can spot his bones somewhere, and so on. Truly, this man is one of the greats in world history, really.

If time had been around then, he would have been time's man of the year maybe several times through his life. It's no wonder that verse 5 and other verses in the Bible call him the servant of the Lord, a title of high honor, indeed, given to Moses.

And we might expect that at the age of 120, which he now is, there would be little for him left to live for. But Moses is still strong.

[6 : 23] Verse 7 tells us that Moses was 120 years old when he died. His sight was unimpaired, which is more than you can say for mine and probably for most of yours. His vigor had not abated, which again is probably more than you can say for me and for most of us here as well.

The point is that Moses' death is not just natural. It's not just, oh, what a shame. He was so old that he didn't quite make it into the promised land. But rather, that his death is God's direct intervention. God is the one who'd excluded Moses from the promised land. That was clear back in the book of Numbers and it's clear two or three times in Deuteronomy in earlier chapters as well.

So the fact that Moses dies at this point is not just simply a long life worn out, but rather that God had decided now is the time before the entry to the promised land.

God had kept him out of the promised land and Moses would die here. That's a little bit tragic at one level. Humanly speaking, I think, oh, how sad.

[7 : 30] Isn't it a bit mean of God? Couldn't God have let him cross over the Jordan? I mean, couldn't he even just set foot on the land and then drop dead on the other side of the Jordan on its banks or something like that?

Couldn't God have allowed Moses to do a sort of primitive version of a papal kiss and cross the Jordan and kiss the land and then drop dead and never get up again or something? That would have been a little bit more, you know, sort of moving, wouldn't it, for the films and for Charlton Heston or whatever?

If anyone could enter the land, surely Moses, the great Moses, surely he could have. But no, you see, even Moses, the great servant of the Lord, was a sinner.

That's why God was precluding him from entry into the land. Back in the book of Numbers, when Moses was provoked by the rebelliousness of Israel, he himself acted without faith and in anger. And because he didn't give God glory at the time when water came out of a rock in Numbers chapter 20, God said, well, you will not enter the land. One might think it's harsh, but remember that in God's economy and God's standards, the wages of any sin is death.

[8 : 41] And Moses deserved to die even then. But God, in his mercy, allows him to live to this point, to see the land, but not to enter it. It reminds us, though, that every hero, even the great Moses, is a sinner.

None is perfect in the Bible, with one exception, Jesus. And even Moses, the great Moses, is himself a sinner and dies outside the land because of his sin.

That's where Deuteronomy 34 as an epitaph of praise sort of breaks down because it has this undercurrent. The reason why he's dying here is not simply old age. It's God's intervention because of Moses' sin.

How different that is from most funeral eulogies. I tend to go to quite a lot of funerals. It's a sort of professional hazard, I suppose. And you hear people speak about people. Sometimes they're people I know, sometimes they're not.

And usually they're words of glowing praise. This person was such a great person. They'd never refuse somebody. They were always generous to a fault and so on.

[9 : 51] It's very rare that you actually get funeral eulogies that perhaps we might say a little bit more balanced and paint out the person's faults as well as their strengths.

Because the point is none of us is perfect. We're all sinners. And for all our good character and noble acts we're also sinful people under God.

Deuteronomy 34 you see and the Bible as a whole is not blind praise of famous people. It's a realistic assessment. And even perhaps for the greatest of people he's a sinner.

In fact think of the heroes of God in the Bible and think how flawed they are. Moses a murderer. Paul in effect a murderer. Cheering on and helping aiding and abetting when Stephen was stoned. David an adulterer a murderer in effect. And so on. God chooses the most unlikely people to be heroes in the Bible which ought to be an encouragement to you and me whether or not we've got murder skeletons in our closets or not.

[11 : 00] That is there's an undercurrent of sin and failure here because that's what human life is like. We're sinners. We're failures under God. And all of us in the end deserve to die.

It's a warning to us I think about how we interpret the Bible because so often it seems to me and this is a sort of caricature of Sunday school lessons but not just for children is that we look at the Bible and we see the human characters and we want to learn from them and use them as examples but the trouble is none of them is a perfect example.

They're all a compromise in motive in action in word because they're like us. And whilst there are things about the human characters that we can learn from and find as examples we have to be very cautious in that sort of interpretation and make sure that our interpretation is not simply at the human level but rather that we see the grand plan of God in all of that and see that in fact the great character of the Bible the great hero of the Bible is God not Moses or Abraham or David or Paul but God himself.

Every hero of faith human one is a flawed character other than Jesus the only exception. Well let's see what this passage is teaching us and one thing is that though Moses dies a sinner he dies full of faith in the promises of God and that's a key theme in the whole of Deuteronomy and it's here in the last chapter as well.

Moses we're told in verse 1 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 all Naphtali the land of Ephraim and Manasseh all the land of Judah as far as the western sea the Negev and the plain that is the valley of Jericho the city of palm trees as far as Zoar.

[13 : 00] What a panoramic view and let me tell you on a clear day you can see pretty well from the top of Mount Nebo but there aren't many clear days and the day I was there was relatively hazy you don't quite get to see the Mediterranean and the western sea as it's called here this is a panoramic sweep from right to left or north to south in effect Moses more or less is facing west and so to his right to the north is Gilead on the same side of the Jordan the part that he's already conquered Dan is the very well later on the very northern tip of Israel now these days almost on the border of Syria and Lebanon and then moving around the tribal areas and across directly in front to Judea or Judah rather at that point which goes all the way to the western sea which you can't see from Mount Nebo and then further south to the desert to the Negev desert beyond which is the Sinai Peninsula and to Egypt and Moses sees and surveys all this land verse 4 though puts this in a context that's important you see this is not just a land but rather it's the promised land 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 will let you see it with your eyes but you shall not cross over there so Moses sees the land but it's the promised land that is what he's being shown is God's promise it's an added reassurance in a sense that God is keeping his promise even though Moses is excluded from entry into that promised land you see what matters is not Moses arriving in the land but God fulfilling his promise to the descendants of Abraham in God's time that's what matters and the Bible in fact is the story of the progress of God keeping his promises that he makes to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 right near the beginning of the Bible to Abraham remember God gave a package of promises we're going to see lots of packages of promises between now and November

the 24th I assume from all sorts of people and political parties and most of us will have an element of cynicism and wonder whether they'll ever all be kept probably not but anyway I'll let you decide that one God keeps his promises all of them utterly maybe not in a three year period but eventually he does and the promises to Abraham that he made were that Abraham's descendants would be numerous that they would be great that he would have this land and that world nations would be blessed through the descendants of Abraham and as you read through the Bible those promises to Abraham keep sort of cropping up from time to time usually one or more is sort of on the surface level of the Bible story and either the promises being steps are being taken to fulfill that promise by God or sometimes the promises in jeopardy because of the failure of trust and obedience of the descendants of Abraham and so through the Old Testament story we see glimpses of fulfillment in Deuteronomy in the early chapters if you can remember way back to January we see that the promise of a numerous descendants to Abraham has already been fulfilled and therefore that ought to be reason for trusting the promise of land will be fulfilled and thus they come to the land in the next book in Joshua and it looks as though step by step the promises to Abraham are being fulfilled gradually Israel in the land becomes wealthy and successful the pinnacle of which is under Solomon 400 years further on than Moses and we see their world blessing as people like the Queen of Sheba come and pay homage to God in the time of Solomon but then we begin to see it all unravel as the promises seem to disintegrate because of the faithlessness and idolatry of Israel as the nation divides and they get conquered and get exiled from the land but those promises are still what is driving the story when we get to the New Testament and so as Mary sings before Jesus is born he's coming because God is faithful to his promises to Abraham and now the promises are actually extended and magnified in the New Testament so the promises to Abraham of a descendants include Gentiles those who trust in the Saviour that the promise of land becomes a heavenly land and the promise of world blessing comes through the gospel to all the nations what that reminds us therefore is that this land that Moses is shown is not actually the final step it is actually an intermediate step and that's why in one sense it doesn't matter too much that Moses doesn't actually cross the Jordan himself because that land is just a sort of middle stage to the heavenly land that is actually the real fulfillment the eternal fulfillment of the promises to Abraham you see the Old Testament promise of land actually is driving us to look forward to a city whose architect and builder is God not a land on earth it's driving us to the heavenly land and therefore the death of Moses looking forward to the promises being fulfilled actually is a model for us to think about for our own lives because Christian living is to be looking forward to the total or final fulfillment of the promises of God in the Old Testament as I've said there are just some glimpses of their fulfillment they keep driving to look forward to the fullness of God's promises being realized but the same in the New Testament though we're several steps down the track of fulfillment with the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection and ascension to heaven we yet remain to see the fullness of God's promises fulfilled we look forward to the land that is kept in heaven for you guarded by faith as Peter says we look forward to the fullness of God's people a number that nobody can count gathered around the throne of God and the throne of the Lamb in the book of Revelation we look forward to God's glory being known and stated by all the nations of the world a blessing that goes to the ends of the earth through the gospel and so we are to be people of faith and hope looking forward with confidence and assurance that God is keeping his promises and on the day of the Lord Jesus' return he will take us to be with him and then we will see and only then will we see the absolute fullness of all of God's promises realized for us Christians sometimes make one of two mistakes on this I think sometimes they demand too much too soon of God's promises that somehow they ought to be realized now here on earth today well yes we're given a down payment of that in the gift of the spirit to every believer but the fullness of God's promises we must await but the other mistake that Christians make is to have too little expectation of God keeping his promises to think that God's promises somehow have withered away and that actually what matters is living this life now keeping a balance is important there is a down payment of fulfillment already but there is a fundamental orientation for Christians to look forward with faith and hope to the fullness of God's promises being revealed and that's in effect what is so triumphant about Moses' death on Mount Nebo that he looks forward with faith to the fulfillment of God's promises in the future well I wonder whether you recognize these words well I don't know what will happen now we've got some difficult days ahead but it doesn't matter with me now because I have been to the mountaintop and I don't mind like anybody

[21 : 20] I would like to live a long life longevity has its place but I'm not concerned about that now I just want to do God's will and he's allowed me to go up the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land and I'm happy tonight I'm not worried about anything I'm not fearing any man mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord April 1968 Martin Luther King the next day he was assassinated putting aside some elements of his theology Martin Luther King understands Deuteronomy 34 in effect he understands that what matters is not that he himself would arrive in the promised land but that we as a people would and that's what matters here in

Deuteronomy 34 not that Moses doesn't enter the promised land himself but that God is keeping his promises for his people an arrival in the promised land for God's people will happen how different that is that view is that expectation and future orientation from our world that demands instant gratification so many things in our world we want it and we want it now but God actually teaches us patience when he gives us hope that we're to look forward with longing with hearts that groan inside us as Paul writes in Romans 8 looking forward to the revelation of the children of God on the final day the future glories of God's heavenly promise are worth waiting for they are far better far more enduring far more precious far more valuable than all the promises of our fleeting world which actually so enrapture us day by day the other thing about this chapter is that it concludes with a note about the uniqueness of Moses verse 10 says never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face he was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh and all his servants in his entire land and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel Moses intimacy with God is noted he knew God or God knew him face to face on Mount Sinai when Moses was atop the mountain there meeting with God hearing God's voice praying to God interceding in God's presence for his people when he would enter into the tent of meeting and come out with a glowing face having met with God in a sense face to face here is the picture of an intimate service servant of God and intimacy with God is something often that we crave but too often look for in the wrong places it seems to me we crave closeness with God lots of modern songs express that you know oh to feel

God's love or arms surround me and that sort of idea and sometimes we look for that intimacy with God in some special spiritual experience heightened atmospheric worship or something but intimacy with God in the scriptures comes when we are faithfully obedient to God's promises and commands so Moses intimacy with God is more often than not associated with his faith and trust in God's promises at that time though he's not perfect as Jesus made clear the night before he was crucified to his disciples that he would abide in them and they in him when they were obedient to God trusting him it's when we trust in Jesus death for the forgiveness of our sins and seek to obey God's commands as a result that we are actually close to God we're abiding in him and he in us that's intimacy with God it's not fundamentally a sort of exciting experience so much as the practice of faithful obedience that's intimacy and the promise of heaven at the end of the scriptures in that picture of heaven at the end of the book of revelation promises us the fullness of that intimacy see the home of

God is among mortals he will dwell with them as their God they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them they will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads that's the intimacy that at some level we enjoy now but we'll find fullness of at the end of time and Moses is an example of that but notice how it's expressed in verse 10 never since has a prophet as great as Moses arisen in Israel that is it's stated in a way that is looking forward to this point when this was written this last paragraph or last chapter sometime after Moses death nobody as great as Moses has come why is it said that way because they expect that there will be a prophet greater than Moses or like Moses to come you see earlier in Deuteronomy if you remember back I think it was May when I preached on chapter 18

[27 : 18] God told Israel that a prophet like Moses will come to the day that this was written that has not yet happened but the expression is actually again forward looking because the greatness of Moses was actually a prototype of a greater than Moses to come Moses for all his greatness as a prophet and servant of God was in fact a model of a greater servant and a greater prophet yet to come through the Old Testament there are a number of prophets some of them have some similarities with Moses most notably Elijah there are great prophets in the Old Testament but one could say probably fairly that at the end of the Old Testament this last paragraph of Deuteronomy

still stands never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face but as the

Old Testament also acknowledges it looks forward to a greater servant of the Lord one who would in fact suffer for his people as Moses had but actually at the cost of his life it's when we get to the New Testament of course that we find the prophet greater than Moses the one who knew the Lord not just face to face but personally because he was God divine the one who was the perfect servant of the Lord the one who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many the one who was not just the mediator of God's word as Moses was great function and role though that was but the one who was the word itself in flesh the one who was not just a doer of great signs and wonders like Moses had been but the one who provided the greatest sign and wonder when the grave was empty and he was risen

Jesus came because God was keeping his promises to Abraham and the promise of a prophet greater than Moses well you and I don't need a mountaintop experience you and I don't need to see the promised land but you're welcome to come with us to Mount Nebo in a few weeks time we don't need that experience though because God's word is sufficient for us to trust in the future promises of God it's a word that Moses trusted and for trust because of the later steps of fulfillment that God had taken most notably in sending Jesus to live to die and to rise God has confirmed his promises in Jesus we've got no reason to doubt them really we've got no need for further assurance and we've got no need for mountaintop experiences as

Jesus said blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe as the hymn writer says God will fulfill in every part each promise he has made but let's go back to conclude to Moses failure to enter the promised land you see like Moses we too fail and sin like Moses we too are under a sentence of death that we rightly deserve but like Moses we too can have confidence that we will enter the final promised land you see Moses though he died outside the land actually did arrive in the land later on on the mountain of transfiguration when Jesus was transfigured before some of his disciples there with him was Moses and Elijah for that matter but even more importantly we can have confidence that in the heavenly land to which this physical land is a prototype

Moses will be there with us he's a hero of faith in Hebrews 11 we will be there as Moses will be there not because we deserve it but because of the mercy of God because of the mercy of atonement because of the mercy of Jesus death for our sins we can trust God's promises despite our sin and have confidence absolute confidence that because Jesus is our forerunner and has placed an anchor there for us that heavenly land is guarded for us through faith and we will be sure that one day we will be there with all of God's faithful people around the throne of God and the lamb singing the praises of God for eternity at the end of his days in effect with Moses final breath he acknowledges

[32 : 34] God's faithfulness to his promise as he sees the land and dies may we with our final breaths also be found faithful servants of God and come at last to the heavenly kingdom of God's promises in Christ Amen