

# A Mountaintop Experience

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of February 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Mountaintop Experience and is based on Deuteronomy chapter 34 verses 1 to 12.

In the offices of the ABC the obituaries for the rich and famous are already written. There is of course already there the obituary for the Queen Mother. Most days it's taken out and dusted down as she approaches 102 years old. There's one for the Pope, Bob Hope I'm sure. Probably they had one ready for Liza Minnelli a year ago though she seems to have recovered quite well. And no doubt there's one for John Howard and all sorts of other rich and famous people young and old.

They're all ready to go as soon as the person dies. You see we like to praise famous people. We like to praise the great, the rich, the famous, the well known.

[ 1 : 13 ] And in the pages of the Old Testament there is none so great as Moses. And in one sense, at least initially, this chapter, Deuteronomy 34, is his epitaph of praise.

Or is it? Who is this great Moses, this leading figure of the Old Testament? Born about 1500 BC. Maybe give or take a few years. At birth, born into a society where his life was in danger from the beginning because of the Egyptian king threatening to kill all Hebrew babies.

But his life was spared, miraculously and almost humorously, by Pharaoh the king's own daughter. And then brought up by his mother. At about the age of 40, he fled to another country, Midian, because he was a murderer.

Hardly an auspicious start for the greatest hero of the Old Testament. There he married the daughter of a priest of Midian. And aged nearly 80, when most of us would be thinking about retirement villages, he was called by God at a bush that didn't burn up, to go and rescue the people of Israel, his kinsfolk, from slavery in Egypt.

[ 2 : 35 ] And it was this Moses who returned to Egypt and confronted the king of the Egyptians, the Pharaoh. And it was this Moses who performed miracles, a whole series of initial ones and then nine significant plagues, as they're called, miracles, signs and wonders before Pharaoh and his courtiers and his magicians in order to force Pharaoh's hand to let the people of Israel go.

There was hail, there was blood, in the Nile there were locusts and all sorts of other animal diseases and natural disasters in a sense as well. It was this Moses who was the instrument for the parting of the Red Sea, miraculously again, so that the people of Israel could pass through and escape from the pursuing army of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

It was through the leadership of this man Moses that God provided water from a rock in the desert, provided a strange and unknown but substance to feed the Israelites through 40 years in the wilderness, a substance later called manna.

At the top of Mount Sinai it was this Moses who heard the voice of God and was given two tablets of stone written on which were the Ten Commandments.

And it was through this Moses that the subsequent other laws of God were given to the people of Israel. It was this Moses who boldly and bravely interceded for the people of Israel on the top of Mount Sinai, while down below the people were revelling and cavorting with the golden calf idol that they had made.

[ 4 : 14 ] It was this Moses who would regularly meet at the tent of meeting, seeing God face to face coming out from the tent, his face aglow. It was this Moses who led the people of Israel through 40 tumultuous years in the wilderness as they came to the border of the promised land but rejected it for fear of its inhabitants and thus fearing people more than God.

It was this Moses who led the people to victory over two kingdoms, Heshbon and its king Sion and Bashan and its king Og. And it was this Moses who at the age of about 120 brought the people of Israel to the verge again of the Jordan River and the promised land in what is now modern day the kingdom of Jordan and the plains of Moab overlooking the north end of the Dead Sea and the flowing river Jordan further north from that sea.

Truly this man is one of the greats. One astonishing obituary the Age would publish or the ABC would broadcast if he were to die now. If it had existed then he would have been Time Magazine's man of the year year after year for much of his life.

And no wonder this final chapter calls him in revered terms the servant of the Lord. We might expect that at the age of 120 there's not much left in life to live for.

But Moses is still strong. We're told in verse 7 of this chapter that though he was 120 years old his sight was unimpaired which is more than you can say for mine and his vigour had not abated.

[ 6 : 02 ] And late on a Sunday night I think that's more than you can say for me as well. So the implication is this is not just a natural death. God chooses to take Moses' life at this point at this time although he was in one sense physically he was not ready to die.

It's God's choosing. In effect it's God who takes him up on Mount Nebo the high peak of the plains of Moab to die. Tragically though there's a sense in which Moses had more to live for for he was not able to enter the promised land itself.

This great man of God the greatest I would say in the Old Testament humanly speaking in a sense fails to enter the great promised land of Canaan.

And it's God who prevents him from doing so. And we may well think isn't that a bit unfair of God.

Couldn't he just let Moses enter the land cross the Jordan dry his feet do a papal kiss on the ground and say I've made it here I am I'm ready to die.

Couldn't God just let him step in there just a couple of steps. If anyone could enter surely Moses could.

[ 7 : 29 ] But he doesn't and he's not allowed to. For even this great servant of God was a sinner. And the reason he's prevented from entering the land is because of his sin.

One particular sin it seems recorded in the book of Numbers the preceding book in the Old Testament to the book of Deuteronomy where this passage is from. where in anger he struck the rock and God in his judgment said he shall not enter the land.

Something Moses pleaded about with God but God was resolute in refusing him entry to the promised land. Moses' death we may want to call it a tragic death in a sense is a reminder to us that the wages of sin is death and Moses the sinner dies here in this chapter 34 of Deuteronomy.

You see in the end this chapter is not really an epitaph of praise. Modern funeral eulogies are usually full of praise and lacking sometimes in realism.

It's astonishing to me how people tolerate people in life but are full of glowing words of praise in death. I've only had a couple of funerals I think in 12 years of ministry where I've been told this was not a particularly pleasant person.

[ 8 : 57 ] Oh he's a great man or she was a wonderful woman. But Deuteronomy 34 and indeed the chapters about Moses leading up to this are realists are real chapters.

They're not full of blind praise of a famous man. They don't gloss over his failures. His death is because he sinned, he failed. It's a death that is anticipated throughout the book of Deuteronomy.

A few times it's mentioned it hangs over the book like a dark cloud in a sense giving the urgency of the book a certain poignancy knowing that Moses is speaking his final words and sermon here.

The book ends then with the undercurrent of sin and failure in a book that is so eager to promote optimism and hope to cross the land and conquer it there is this very clear recognition that the leader of the people will not be there for he has in the past failed.

Lots of people make mistakes in Bible interpretation because they focus on the characters of the Bible too much or too exclusively. You see it in Sunday school all the time about looking at what David was like or Peter or Paul or somebody like that but there are plenty of adult popular Christian books that are just the same sort of thing telling us about heroes and whether we should follow them and so on.

[ 10 : 25 ] Character studies of biblical heroes have their place and the Bible from time to time wants us to learn from people's character their good points and their bad. See here is a great hero it would be tempting to say well here is somebody to follow but cruelly in one sense in his life is his failure.

You see it becomes quite tricky sometimes working out what sort of part of a person's character we follow and what part we don't because in the end the Bible is not just there giving us stories about people it's a story about God and Moses is God's great servant and we distort this passage and misinterpret if in our focus we see Moses alone but do not see the panorama of God's purposes and plans surrounding Moses his life and his death.

You see every hero in the Bible with one exception Jesus is a flawed character. Moses the greatest of the Old Testament died a sinner.

It's why he could not enter the promised land. the ultimate hero here as elsewhere in the Bible is God. How is that worked out here?

Moses' death atop the Mount of Nebo in the plains of Moab overlooks the promised land. The promise of the land is reassured to Moses in verse 4.

[11:57] This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob saying I will give it to your descendants. I've let you see it with your eyes but you shall not cross over there.

That is the land that Moses has just been shown is clearly said as in fact many times in Deuteronomy it is said it is the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Moses is given a sort of anti-clockwise navigational tour of the land from the top Mount Nebo in verses 1 to 3. The Lord showed him the whole land and starting with in effect the east side of the Jordan and heading north and then across to the west and then down through the land it is described.

He sees Gilead as far as Dan the very northern border of the land all Naphtali one of the northern tribes the land of Ephraim and Manasseh and coming further south into the west of where Moses is standing all the land of Judah as far as the western sea that's the Mediterranean.

The Negev which is at the south the desert area and the plain beyond it the coastal plain and then the plain or the valley of Jericho the city of palm trees as far as Zohar.

[13:22] I stood on Mount Nebo some years ago. I couldn't see all that it was far too hazy. I'm not sure that humanly speaking even on the clearest of days you could see all that.

Perhaps in some supernatural experience God has picked up Moses to see the whole land or maybe it's just been described as he surveys as far as his eyes can see. But the point is this is a real land and it is the land that God has promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's descendants after him.

You see the hero here is not Moses but God. And the point of showing Moses the land and reminding him of the promise is not really in one sense for Moses' benefit but for the reader's benefit.

That God who promised the land is indeed faithful to give it. And here Moses dies on the verge of that land. There's also perhaps in the ancient world a sense when you see and survey a land it's like staking your claim on it.

same sort of thing perhaps happens with Abraham and Lot back in Genesis 13. So maybe here in the way that God shows Moses the land from north to south and east to west there's a sense in which he's saying the ownership of this land is mine but it belongs to my people.

[14:41] I'm surely going to give what I promise. You see what matters in the end is not Moses arriving in the land before he dies. what matters is God fulfilling his promises in God's time to give the Israelites the land.

See what we see here is actually a picture of what we see right through the Bible as a theme and thread. See the Bible is the story of the progress of the promises of God from their inception back early in the book of Genesis to Abraham, their recapitulation to subsequent generations, and then they're working towards their ultimate fulfilment.

But what we see at every stage of the Bible is that the promises of God remain in toto unfulfilled. There are glimpses of their fulfilment here and there, partial fulfilment here and there, but even when Jesus comes the promises of God are yet to be fulfilled.

That awaits the end of history. And so God made promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 which included this land. Descendants for Abraham, by the time of Moses that in a sense is fulfilled. Blessing to God's people, glimpses of its fulfilment but not that much in Moses' death. And also that through the people of God other nations would be blessed.

[16:08] And so the story goes, not a story of great heroes, but a story of God the hero keeping his promises even when they're in jeopardy through his people's failure and through all sorts of other instances and circumstances.

The promises stay alive at every point, even when we might expect that they will die out. And so the promises made to Abraham and his descendants look as though they're not going to be fulfilled because the descendants end up in Egypt away from the land under the threat of Pharaoh.

But the Israelites under the leadership of Moses come out towards the land, but even when they conquer the land after Moses' death under the leadership of Joshua to whom the mantle has been passed in these last chapters of Deuteronomy, we just see glimpses of fulfilment.

But all too soon the land is under threat from tribal peoples that have not been conquered and through the sin of God's own people. Later on Israel will get a king.

More promises of God are associated with a king. But throughout the turmoil of Israel's history from having a king at 1000 BC for 400 years, the promises never reach their ultimate fulfilment.

[17:18] The high point of them comes at the reign of Solomon when the land is strong, vast and wealthy and other pagans come in and praise the God of Solomon, such as the Queen of Seba.

But it's all too elusive, these promises of God. And they begin to subside as land is lost, as wealth is lost, as kingdoms are lost and kings are killed. And in the end the people end up outside the land again in exile.

Oh God brings them back in about 500 BC to the land after their exile as we mentioned last week.

But even then the great promises of God fall far short of their ultimate fulfilment.

And then in the New Testament Jesus arrives. He comes, we're told very clearly in the New Testament, because God is keeping his promises to Abraham. It's not a new story, it's not a new promise.

It's the same promise and God is keeping it. 2,000 years after he made the promise to Abraham, Jesus arrives. And through his life, his death and his resurrection, again we see glimpses of the fulfilment of the promises of God to the world and to God's people.

[18:27] But even after Jesus rises and ascends to heaven, we recognise those promises are yet to be completely fulfilled. fulfilled. And throughout the story of the early church in the rest of the New Testament, the same is true.

The promises of God await their ultimate fulfilment. But we see a vision of that at the end of scripture. A vision of their ultimate fulfilment in heaven, in the final chapters of the book of Revelation.

That's where history is heading. That's what we are to look forward to. And what we see here with Moses dying, overlooking the promised land and being reassured of God keeping his promise of land, even if Moses personally was not to enjoy the land of milk and honey, we see what we are meant to be like, looking forward with confidence and faith to the ultimate fulfilment of the promises of God.

In the Old Testament, glimpses of those promises. In the New Testament, the same. In our lives, the same. Occasional glimpses of God's promises being fulfilled in us through our conversion and leading others to Christian faith through the blessings that we receive from God and so on.

But we know all too well that even as Christians living in this world, there is a better place that awaits us, a better land, a better promised land, a heavenly inheritance that we look forward to, but in one sense have not yet fully arrived at.

[20:00] You see, the death of Moses overlooking the land is telling us about the fundamental direction of the Bible. It is looking forward to the fulfilment of promises, trusting a God who keeps his promises.

There is always an essential future direction for Christian faith. It is not just faith in what God has done, but faith in God who will keep to the end the promises that he has made originally to Abraham.

Christians sometimes, I think, fall into one of two errors. One is that we don't claim enough of the promises of God, that we somehow think that God's promises are redundant and gone, and so we don't believe that he's actually going to do anything.

But sometimes our error is that we claim too much of God's promises. We want too much too soon. That is, we want to be in the fulfilment of the promised land now. And so we want the blessings, the full blessings of the promised land now.

In one sense, we've already received every spiritual blessing in Christ, as Paul says in Ephesians 1, but the fulfilment of the promises of God remains essentially in the future for us.

[21:12] And we must live with faith, trusting that that future is certainly coming. Deuteronomy throughout emphasises that God is faithful to his promises, promises, and that theme is reiterated

here in the death of Moses because of its context of overlooking the promised land and the reassurance that this is the land that God has promised, and to see it is almost to reassure Moses, yes, I will certainly give this land to my people.

Seeing the land is a reassurance then for Moses, even though he's prevented from entering it through sin, there is nonetheless the grace and mercy of God, reassuring him of the promise that the land is certainly coming.

See, God's the hero, because he's the one who's keeping the promise. In April 1968, Martin Luther King said, 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, I'd 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.

[ 22 : 39 ] 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. And the next day, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Putting aside his theology, perhaps, his allusion to Deuteronomy 34 actually shows an understanding of that passage, a confidence in God's faithfulness from the mountaintop.

He may not enter the promised land, but he's reassured and confident that God is keeping his promise and will bring it about. Faith trusts the faithfulness of God.

This future direction of faith is something that is always a challenge to us, I think. It's a challenge because our world is consistently wanting an instant gratification. What it wants, it wants now, if not yesterday.

We live in a more and more immediate and urgent society. It is a challenge, I think, in that society to hold on to the future promises of God and their fulfillment one day in heaven.

[ 23 : 55 ] We're all too often tempted to want it now, immediately, and if it doesn't arrive, to abandon the promise. It's 4,000 years since God made that promise to Abraham.

It may be millions more before it's finally fulfilled. But it is coming. We can be certain that God is faithful and he will not let any of his promises fall to the ground.

Deuteronomy 34 ends with a comment about the uniqueness of Moses. In particular, Moses' intimacy with God is mentioned. There has never arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

Moses had met with God face to face in the tent of meeting many times, on the top of Mount Sinai after the golden calf incident, interceding for Israel.

Here is the intimate servant of God, the one who's known God face to face. Often it seems to me Christians long to become more intimate with God, to draw closer to him.

[ 25 : 09 ] We long to feel his love surround us, as one of our modern songs says, as though somehow we're not quite close enough to God. Oh, to be on the intimate terms that Moses was, to see God face to face.

How is this intimacy with God attained? It's worth, in one sense, a digression from this passage for that. Intimacy with God comes through faithful obedience to God.

It's that simple. Jesus, in particular, made that clear the night before he died. In the upper room with his disciples, we're told in John 15, that he said to them, on this topic, if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments, and abide in his love.

There's the greatest intimacy. You cannot get closer to God than the intimacy the son and the father shared. That intimacy is ours through faithful obedience.

We might say, well, how can Moses qualify to be so intimate with God face to face when he sinned? But there is the grace of God highlighted, I think, for us. That we do not have to be perfect, but ultimately forgiven by the mercy of God.

[ 26 : 37 ] There's a gracious act of God to see Moses face to face and allow Moses to see God face to face. You see, intimacy doesn't come through some orgasmic spiritual ecstasy.

It comes through straightforward and simple faithful obedience to the commands of God. In your longing to be close to God, don't go up the wrong path searching for intimacy.

But more than that, this theme of seeing God face to face is one that climaxes at the end of the Bible as well. For there in that promised heavenly land or heavenly inheritance, God will dwell with

his people in perfect intimacy.

No longer in any way remote, but us and God together in his heavenly promised land. Moses seeing God face to face was perhaps a foretaste of what will apply even in a more intimate sense for all of us.

Not because we're perfect, but because of the grace and mercy of God to us in Christ. So here Moses, the great servant, is a forerunner of the greatest servant.

[ 28 : 01 ] Later on in Old Testament history, some hundreds of years after Moses, the prophet Isaiah predicts the servant of the Lord to come, to die for the people. And when Jesus was born hundreds of years again later than Isaiah, it was clear that he saw himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy, the greatest servant of all.

But it is through Jesus, the great servant who dies for us, that we can have the hope one day of hearing God say to us, well done, good and faithful servant.

Like Moses, we fail and sin. But like Moses, we too will finally arrive in the great promised land. We see a beautiful instance of that in the New Testament. We're on the mountain of transfiguration. Jesus appears in dazzling array with Moses as well as Elijah.

And there at last Moses is in the promised land alongside Jesus for a time on that mountain. But of course, that's not the fulfillment of promise either. For Moses, like us, it's our arrival in the New Jerusalem, God's heavenly inheritance that is kept in heaven for us who are guarded by faith.

[ 29 : 21 ] At the time this chapter was written, no doubt by somebody other than Moses, after all he's dead before the end of it. No prophet had arisen like Moses yet in Israel's history.

So the final verses in full say, 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. Nobody else to this point has arisen like Moses.

We're not sure who added this comment. I suspect it's a few years after Moses' death, maybe even a few generations after Moses' death. But the point is that God had promised a great prophet, not only a greater servant than this servant of the Lord Moses, but a greater prophet than this prophet of the Lord Moses.

Back in chapter 18, that promise was made that a great prophet would come. And the writer here is saying he's not yet come. Moses is still the greatest so far, but we know and trust that a greater one is yet coming.

[ 30 : 39 ] And throughout the Old Testament there were a sequence of great prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, before them Elijah, perhaps one of the great prophets of the Old Testament as well.

But none of them matched it with Moses. And so the Old Testament ends with an incomplete promise, which we do find fulfilled in the New Testament.

Because the greater prophet has come. Jesus Christ himself. Not just the mediator of God's word like Moses the prophet, but the word in flesh.

Not just the transmitter of God's law like Moses, but its very source. Not just another miracle worker full of signs and wonders like Moses, but rather the source of all miracles and power and resurrection life.

And Jesus came because God's faithful. God keeps that promise. As indeed he keeps them all. In the end we don't need a mountaintop experience like Martin Luther King or even like Moses.

[ 31 : 50 ] We do not need to see the promised land. Physically or spiritually. But because God has spoken to us his reliable word. And he's confirmed that word.

Especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have no reason to doubt it. And nor do we need anything else. For further assurance that God is faithful to keep it.

As Jesus said, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. And we can indeed believe that God will fulfil in every part each promise he has made.

Amen. Amen.