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Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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MOSES, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD DIED Deuteronomy 34

If you have been involved in funeral arrangements for a loved one who has passed, you know how expensive it is to place an obituary in the local newspaper. For that reason, many families are foregoing the tradition. It makes me wonder sometimes how much money some families spend to eulogize their loved ones. According to the New York times, the average obituary is around 200-300 words, but some of the obituaries they printed have reached as much as 10,000 words.

So who gets these lengthy goodbyes? According to The New York Times, your best bet is to be either a president or a pope. The newspaper, which publishes around 1,000 obituaries every year, recently shared the longest obituaries they've published in the last 40 years. President Gerald Ford had the fifth-longest obituary ever published by the New York Times, clocking in at 7,674 words. President Reagan's obituary was exactly 11,411 words long. President Nixon's obituary had a word count of 13,155. Pope John Paul II currently has the longest obituary ever published by The New York Times at 13,870 words.

Some people have resorted to writing their own obituaries in advance so that they can approve of what is published. Before Val Patterson died in 2012, he took the time to write his own obituary. In it, he decided to come clean about some of the things he kept secret his whole life. He started by explaining that he is the one who "stole the safe from the Motor View Drive Inn back in June, 1971." He even explains that he never actually did earn his degree: "I really am NOT a PhD. What happened was that the day I went to pay off my college student loan at the U of U, the girl working there put my receipt into

the wrong stack, and two weeks later, a PhD diploma came in the mail. I didn't even graduate, I only had about three years of college credit. In fact, I never did even learn what the letters 'PhD' even stood for."

Did Moses write his own obituary? There are a couple of standard answers about this question. Historically, some Bible students have concluded that someone like Joshua or maybe Eleazar appended this obituary to Deuteronomy. Others have concluded that Moses actually did write these final words about his own death. How could he have done that? And, if he did, why would Moses say things about himself like, "There has not been a prophet like him in Israel since" or "No one was like Moses for all the signs God did through him"? The argument in that case is that Moses wrote his own obituary prophetically.

I don't think I will try that for myself. I'm pretty sure I would get it wrong. I am also pretty sure that Joshua or one of the leaders who knew Moses well wrote these final words about him. And a great eulogy it is. These closing words remind us that Moses is one of the great examples in all of human history of what the servant of the Lord should aspire to be.

The LORD's Last Instruction to Moses on Earth (vv.1-4).

Moses obeyed the command the LORD had already given him. We read in chapter thirty-two that God had told Moses, "*Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession*" (Deuteronomy 32:49). There is nothing hard to understand in that command. God had plainly revealed the details of His will for His choice servant's end. The LORD told Moses to go to a particular place, and from that place he was to view the Promised Land which he would never enter.

It is important to note that, even in the context of consequential judgment for sin, God was merciful to keep His promise by giving the Promised Land as a possession to "the people." The simple phrase, "the people" should stand out to us. Israel was "the people" in contrast to all other people because of God's choice. And the mass of the nation, "the people" are held in contrast to Moses the leader in

this situation. “The people’s” parents were instrumental in causing Moses to sin, which resulted in God barring him from enjoying the promised blessing. But “the people” were about to enter the Promised Land and Moses (the victim?) was not.

How would you and I handle that kind of instruction? What would we do if God plainly, audibly said, “This is what I want you to do just before I take you in death”? That is almost too scary to think about. Moses did not hesitate. When God told Moses that the time had come, he obeyed. *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 all the 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 Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar (vv.1-3).*

According to our text, Moses walked up Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to a peak called Pisgah. It is interesting that Moses began with the nation at Mt. Sinai. He ended his work with the nation at Mount Nebo. We do not know the exact location of Mount Nebo and the peak named Pisgah. We do know from the text that it was opposite Jericho. From that vantage point, the Lord revealed to Him much of the Promised Land. Some of the land Moses could see with the naked eye. However, it seems impossible that Moses would be able to see all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe God revealed the far reaches of the land through divine, miraculous revelation.

What did the servant of the LORD see? He saw *Gilead as far as Dan (v.1)*. Moses saw *all Naphtali (v.2)*, which was way up north beside the Sea of Galilee. Moses saw *the land of Ephraim and Manasseh (v.2)*. Part of that he could see with the naked eye. The further reaches of Ephraim could not be seen normally. Moses saw, *all the land of Judah as far as the western sea (v.2)*. No normal human vision would be able to view all the way to the western sea. Moses also saw *the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar (v.3)*. Jericho would have been very obvious directly across the Jordan River from where Moses stood on the mountain.

In that setting of showing Moses all the wonderful Promised Land, the LORD restated His promise regarding the land. *And the LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to*

Isaac, and to Jacob, ‘I will give it to your offspring’” (v.4a). In the midst of judgment, God remembered mercy toward His people. Was God obligated to pick Abraham out of all people and promise to make his seed into God’s chosen nation? No. Was God obligated to give a particular piece of property to His chosen nation? No. Was God obligated to keep His promise after the people of the chosen nation stubbornly, willfully continued to reject God, criticize God, disobey God, and dishonor God? No. But God planned on keeping His promise.

Nor was God obligated in any way to draw you and me to Christ. But He does. God was not obligated to open our spiritual eyes so that we could see our sin while other people, even very religious people, are unable to understand their offense against God. God was not obligated to forgive our sins and restore us to fellowship with Him. God is not obligated to shower us with His grace day by day even when we treat Him lightly or ignore Him altogether, or even offend Him—purposely! God is not obligated to promise us eternal life lived in His presence. But in a display of incredible, immeasurable, incomprehensible grace and mercy God has done all of that for us. Will He not then keep all of the promises He has given to us in the Bible?

Sometimes the promises God has made and must keep are a bit painful for His servants who have wandered out of fellowship with the LORD. So God’s promise regarding His servant Moses. *“I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there” (v.4b)*. It does seem a bit harsh to human pathos that God would prohibit Moses from entering the land.

But then, it was a display of God’s mercy in judgment to allow Moses to view the land. In this situation, the Lord did not give the reason for prohibiting Moses from entering the land because He had already explained the matter in very clear terms. God had told Moses, *“Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession. And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and*

because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. For you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there, into the land that I am giving to the people of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:49-52).

Now that Moses obeyed God and went to Mount Nebo, there was no need to bring up Moses’ sin in his obituary. The consequences alone were sufficiently sad.

Promise Fulfilled (vv.5-8).

The most painful part of God’s promise in our text might be that God’s servant died. And this was according to the word of the LORD. *So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD (v.5).* Notice that the obituary does not say, “The sinner died.” Rather, we read that the servant of the Lord died.

While this is a very sad statement, the same end is in store for all of the Lord’s servants if the Lord tarries His coming. We all will die according to the word of the Lord. God’s word to Adam was clear: *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17).* We know from the record how Satan contradicted God’s promise. *But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4).* Sadly, Adam and Eve trusted Satan more than God and they proved that God keeps His word. They began dying at that very moment.

And we will all die according to God’s word. *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27a).* But once again, in the context of judgment against sin, God’s word also promises mercy. *So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).* We sinners are blessed greatly in contrast to the condemnation we deserve.

In the context of taking His servant home, God honored His servant’s body. *God buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this*

day (v.6). This statement is full of mystery. Why didn’t God allow Moses to die normally in the presence of the people so they could have put his body in a marked tomb or, even better, so they could have built a memorial to him? That is precisely why God secretly buried His servant. If they knew where Moses’ body was, the people probably would have stolen it and taken it into the Promised Land. God didn’t want Moses in the Promised Land. Or no doubt there would be a shrine built and silly people would still be worshiping Moses instead of Moses’ God.

But even more mysterious is Jude’s statement about Moses’ body. *But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you” (Jude 1:9).* Michael is God’s most powerful or authoritative angel (that is what archangel means). He is the protector of God’s people. The interpreting angel explained that to Daniel the Jew. *“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people” (Daniel 12:1).*

Apparently, God gave responsibility of the burial of Moses’ body to Michael. And also apparently, Satan presumed that because Moses sinned and, therefore, was barred from entering the Promised Land, that God didn’t forgive Moses which gave Satan a right to Moses’ body. Michael appealed to God who obviously prohibited Satan from taking Moses’ body.

From this mysterious situation, we might draw some conclusions. In the ancient Jewish culture, burial was a symbol of respect for the body. It is true that the soul is the eternal part and the body decays. Yet, when God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created man in their image, they fashioned a body like ours. We cannot say how much our body reflects God’s image, but there must be a certain amount of connection which deserves a certain amount of respect (or so it has been in the Jewish culture).

In response to God taking Moses, God’s people mourned (vv.7-8). They honored the servant who had served to the end. *Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated (v.7).* From this statement, we must conclude that Moses experienced a premature death. What? He was 120 years old. It is highly unlikely that his peers achieved that age. Caleb was 85 when

he conquered his portion of the Promised Land (Joshua 14:10). Joshua died at 110. Still all of these men reached unusually old ages.

But of Moses we read (in spite of his age), *His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated* (v.7). By human standards, Moses still had many good years of service left in him. But God was ready to put His people into the Promised Land and, according to God's promise, Moses was not permitted to go in. So it was time for Moses to say, "Good bye," and God's timing is the only timing that really matters.

Therefore, we all do well to contemplate Moses' advice. *Indeed, all our days slip away because of your fury. We live out our years like one long sigh. Each of us lives for 70 years – or even 80 if we are in good health. But the best of them bring trouble and misery. Indeed, they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who fully understands the power of your anger? A person fears you more when he better understands your fury. Teach us to number each of our days so that we may grow in wisdom* (Psalm 90:9-12 GWV).

The people wept. *And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended* (v.8). Let's remember that these weeping people were the children of the people who said to Moses things like, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" (Exodus 2:14). Or "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Exodus 5:21). And on more than one occasion, "Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle?" (Numbers 20:4). "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food" (Numbers 21:5).

One might fairly conclude from the evidence that the people really were not all that fond of Moses. But that was the first generation of Israelites, and all those people died without inheriting the Promise because of their disrespect for God and subsequently God's servant. Were their children that much different? Maybe not. The weeping people were people who Moses just recently assessed as: "For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days

to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands" (Deuteronomy 31:29).

It is not unusual that at a person's death the people who grieve most obviously are those who failed to show love and respect while the deceased person was alive. I remember when Pat's and my home pastor Roy Plank passed away without warning from a massive heart attack. He had been a Fighting Fundamentalist whose preaching, presence, and pronouncements in the city often caused the liberal religious establishment to react with harsh assessments and public criticism of the man. But when he died, the newspaper printed many glowing eulogies from the very same liberal religionists who used to criticize him publicly.

None Like Moses (vv.9-12).

In verse nine we read that Nun was like Moses (v.9). Joshua was the son of Nun. *And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him* (v.9a). In our modern American way of thinking, Joshua, son of Nun, would have the last name of "Nun." Therefore, "Nun" really was like Moses. He was full of the spirit of wisdom. For several years Joshua had already proven to be a faithful, dependable servant of God even as he served Moses. Joshua was the warrior, the captain of the rag-tag army of Israel who fought off the Amalekites (Exodus 17:10). He had accompanied Moses part way up Mount Sinai when Moses received God's law (Exodus 24:13). He was often by Moses' side in the critical issues (Exodus 33:11). He defended Moses when he concluded that it was wrong for other people to prophecy (Numbers 11:28).

God had already instructed Moses that Joshua would be his replacement (Numbers 27:18). Therefore, in a ceremony God prescribed, Moses laid his hands on Joshua to symbolize that passing of leadership (Numbers 27:22). Either at the ceremony or at some point previous and obvious to all, God had endowed Joshua with the Holy Spirit who gave him unusual wisdom. This does not mean that Moses' action in that ceremony somehow conveyed the Holy Spirit to Joshua. Rather it was a recognition of the work God had already done. It would have been much like the people's recognition of

Timothy's gift which was not conveyed at ordination but was affirmed at his ordination. Paul challenged Pastor Timothy, "*Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you*" (1 Timothy 4:14). The counsel did not give Timothy the spiritual gift. But they recognized that God had already so gifted Timothy.

Joshua Nun took the position of leader and the people obeyed him. *So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses (v.9b)*. Other than the case with Achan, it does appear that the people fell in line behind Joshua's leadership. Did Moses wonder if the people would resist his replacement? Did the people feel like it would be difficult to follow a new leader? Probably not, because they didn't exactly follow Moses that well. This is a wonderful reminder that when the work in question is God's work, God will have His servant picked and prepared.

No other servant of the Lord could compare with Moses. Whoever penned this obituary stated that there was no other prophet like Moses. *And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face (v.10)*. Again, this last chapter of Deuteronomy had to be the work of someone other than Moses. I would like to think that Joshua wrote it. Joshua would understand Moses' unique friendship and association with God.

That God knew Moses face to face was possibly the most significant aspect of Moses' ministry. When Miriam and Aaron resisted Moses claiming he was a dictator, this is the trait that God brought up to vindicate Moses. God said regarding Moses, "*With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?*" (Numbers 12:8). This has a rare trait throughout human history.

Furthermore, in Israel's short history, there was no other instrument of the LORD's power like Moses. Moses was the unique instrument of God's power against the Egyptians. *None like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land (v.11)*. And Moses was the unique instrument of God's power in behalf of His people Israel. *For all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (v.12)*.

Few servants of the LORD throughout the whole of Israel's history were comparable. God worked multiple miracles and divine power through Elijah and to a lesser extent Elisha. And then of course Jesus was the consummate miracle worker through His own power. That causes us to stop to think about the meeting at Christ's transfiguration. *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him (Matthew 17:2-3)*. How fitting.

Moses is still the most venerated prophet in Judaism. To this day, the Jews hold Moses above all others, including Jesus, who they believe was an imposter. But Moses was not an amazing servant because of his natural abilities. He was the unique servant of the LORD because God chose him, God equipped him, God gave him opportunities, God communicated with him, God used him as an instrument to do His work. And so God would use us in similar ways. Are we willing?