

# Will I Ever Reach the Promised Land?

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## **Deuteronomy 34: 1- 8**

My father retired at an early age, well before he was sixty. He never really liked his job and finally he and my mother decided that with his pension and a small inheritance she had received, he could retire. Like many couples they had plans to travel and spend more time with their grandchildren. But, not long after my father's retirement, my mother's health began to decline and never really recovered. She spent most of her remaining years essentially bedridden and her care ate up most of their inheritance. Not long before his own death, Dad said to me, "It wasn't supposed to be this way." He died haunted by unfulfilled expectations and disappointment.

But isn't that a persistent theme in the human story? Admiral Lord Nelson won one of the greatest naval victories of all time at Trafalgar, a victory, one could argue, that reshaped the history of the western world. A heroic moment, but one he never savored. For during the battle, he was seriously wounded and died in the "tween decks" of his flagship. Much later, one historian wrote of him – "So near the promised land, but he only glimpsed it from afar."

Much the same could be said of Abraham Lincoln. He had come to war's end, had guided his beloved union through a horrific conflict and now stood ready to lead the country on a new path, the path of "malice toward none and charity for all." But, tragically, it was not to be. After his fateful visit to Ford's Theater, what was said of Nelson could also have been spoken of Lincoln – "So near the promised land, he only glimpsed it from afar." For the great and heroic, but also for those who simply struggle to get by each day, - my father, you and me – it seems we all must grapple with the reality of unfulfilled expectations and disappointments.

Of course, all of this is but an echo of one of the most powerful and moving stories in the history of our human family – the Biblical story of Moses. You heard the sad conclusion of his remarkable journey in our text for today. For forty years he struggled with a stubborn and often impossible people; forty years he heard them complain; forty years he dwelt in tents and lived off the land; forty years spent as a pilgrim and sojourner; forty years struggling to remain faithful to his God. And all to one end: that he might finally lead his people into the Promised Land – that hoped for land of milk and honey.

Which brings us to our text. At long last, after so much pain and struggle, the fateful day arrived. He stood on the mountain across from Jericho and gazed longingly into the Promised Land. There it was...this close. What must he have been feeling at that moment? But then he hears these words of God: "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over into it." And there, a stone's throw from his life's goal, his lifelong dream, Moses dies.

The story of Moses' death, so near the fulfillment of his dream, has to be the mother of all bad endings. What are we supposed to take from this? If this could happen to a giant of the faith like Moses then what chance to we have? Does this story tell us that disappointment and unfulfilled hopes and dreams are pretty much what we can expect from life? I think of the Norwegians who inhabit Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, people who, when things are going well, "Oh yeah, today's all right, but you can't be too sure about tomorrow... don't cha know." Keillor says that the good people of Lake Wobegon know that happiness is like an early spring day on the northern plains – it's an illusion, like a painting of flowers on a stone wall. If you reach in too enthusiastically, you must might bust your knuckles. Those are my people! I am those people! Never trust happiness – don't dare to dream big dreams. Life will disappoint you in the end! Again, is that what the Moses story is telling us? I'm not sure Moses would say that.

This past week, I read again the last speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered in Memphis, the night before his murder. King could not make a speech without biblical references. It was a tense time; there had been more than one threat on his life. Here is how he concluded that speech. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, 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 to 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!"

Almost sounds like Moses was his speech writer. I don't know how well you know the geography of Israel and Palestine, but note that Deuteronomy tells us that from Mount Nebo, Moses was able to see all of the Promised Land, from Judah to the Western Sea – all of it. He must have had

one powerful set of binoculars! Of course it is not physically possible to see that far. There is just a bit of literary embellishment in the story. But that doesn't mean it isn't true. Says one of my mentors in ministry, Bill Nelson, "Moses, in his mind's eye, had been looking at the Promised Land for forty years. It had been a dream, a vision, something no one else had seen. But he had seen it. He had lived with it in his heart."

Now I suppose, in our task driven, results oriented world, one could make a case that Moses was a failure. Yes, he came close but everyone knows close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. But would that be true? Yes, Moses never made it into the Promised Land, but what about the forty years in the wilderness? Just a waste of time? What about the people he created out of an unruly mob? What about the loyalty and character and devotion he inspired and maintained? What about the quality of leadership it took to get them that far? And what about his own faithfulness and courage and resolve – something we remember and celebrate to this day? Clearly Martin Luther King, Jr. took Moses as a role model. Perhaps Moses finally understood, as King understood, that there is far more to life than simply achieving a final objective.

Robert Louis Stevenson died at the age of 44 with, as one writer said, a million stories still in his heart. Who would not insist that his journey on this earth was much too brief, but he never said so. No, he said this, "I begrudge me not a minute of my journey. I travel not to go anywhere, but to go... for to travel hopefully is better than to arrive."

It is probably already obvious to you, but the story of Moses, indeed the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., have touched my heart in these closing days of my ministry among you. The part of me that resides permanently in Lake Wobegon can focus so quickly on the glass that is half empty – the what-ifs and almos, the should haves and shouldn't haves: "Should I have stayed here for so long, was it healthy for the church and for me, should I have tried harder for that thousand member church in another state? I wish, as I prepare to leave, that we had more church members, greater worship attendance, a more secure financial base. I should have been a better administrator, taken bolder stands in the name of justice and peace, spent more time with my young family years ago and less time at the church. And so it goes. So close to the promised land, and yet still regrets, still hopes and dreams left unfulfilled, the feeling of opportunities missed.

Ah, but then there is the journey that has brought us to this moment: I think of the many couples, young and old, gay and straight, who came down this aisle on Valentine's Day to thank me for marrying them. It still brings a tear to my eye. I think of baptisms, of memorial services that moved me to the depths of my soul. I think of committees and a congregation that took great risks in the name of faith, of budgets and budget makers that dared to look to the future; I think of mission trips and picnics and celebrations and so many wonderful moments shared on Sunday mornings. I think of buildings built and ministry expanded. I think of the people from our church ordained to Christian ministry. I think of thousands of apple pies, and the laughter – so much laughter. It really is remarkable, you know. In a time when so many churches like ours are cutting back, even closing, we have continued to look ahead, to take risks, to believe in our future. Indeed we saw a glimpse of that future during the children's message today. But most of all, I think of you, of so many precious, precious relationships. I have been formed, challenged and deepened by you. I am a more faithful person than I was thirty years ago. I have been deeply and richly blessed on this journey. And so, even as I wrote this, the regrets and should haves kind of faded away leaving only thankfulness and joy. The journey with you truly has brought me to the mountaintop and enabled me, too, to look into the Promised Land.

And one final thing... Yes, we have done a lot, but we are still unfinished; we have set our hearts on and accomplished much, but we are still incomplete. We have not yet arrived. And that's a good thing.

I once came across this story: An American tourist asked an old gardener on the grounds of Oxford in England, "What makes these lawns so lovely?" The old fellow answered, "Well, we just waters them and mows them and rolls them, and waters them and mows them and rolls them, and waters them and rolls them and mows them... for eight hundred years, and then they look like this!"

There may be a touch of exaggeration in his words, but the truth remains: we do what we can, stay faithful to our tasks and the people we love, make everything we can of ourselves and our opportunities and then, knowing we are still unfinished, we must let go, let go of the past, and trust others, a new generation, indeed God, to see it through.

So do not be saddened that Moses never went over into the Promised Land – for in the midst of the journey he had seen it more clearly than any other. And do not rail against the incompleteness of his journey – or our journeys – for no one's journey is ever quite complete. And this I do know – something else lives on... something else lives on. But for that, we must dare to have faith and trust... in each other, in the future and in God.