



A Good Death

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

“The LORD spoke to Moses that very same day, saying, ‘Go up to this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and look at the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the sons of Israel for a possession. Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with Me in the midst of the sons of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not treat Me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel. For you shall see the land at a distance, but you shall not go there, into the land which I am giving the sons of Israel’” (Deuteronomy 32:48-52).

“Now 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, and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, ‘This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.’ So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day. Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end. Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses,

whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (Deuteronomy 34:1-12).

Last year, Dave Freeman, co-author of the book, *100 Things To Do Before You Die*, died at age 47 from a head injury resulting from a fall at his home. His book inspired the movie *The Bucket List*. Freeman's own list included things like attending the Academy Awards, running with the bulls in Spain, and taking a voodoo pilgrimage in Haiti. The story drips with irony because Freeman had actually gotten to do only about half of the things on his list before he died at a relatively young age. He reminds us that we may never get to accomplish all the things we hope to do.

Dave Freeman kind of reminds me of Moses. We’ve been studying the book of Deuteronomy since August. This book contains several sermons given by Moses to the people of Israel as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land ready to enter in. Thus far, the focus has been on getting them ready to live in the land. Moses has said very little about himself; about his own life and his own aspirations. But one of the things we do know is Moses desperately wanted to go into the land with them. As a matter of fact, he told the people back in ch. 3 that he “pleaded with the Lord saying, ‘O Lord GOD, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand... Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon’” (vv.23-25). If Moses had a “bucket list” I think that would have been the only thing on it. He wanted to enter the land.

I. A good death is not without its disappointments.

But now as we come to the end of Deuteronomy we see that it’s time for Moses to die. God said to Moses, “Climb this mountain and die there.” And with that God makes it very clear that Moses would see the land but not go into the land. Moses was a great man; a godly man. Down in 33:1 he’s called “Moses, the man of God.” And in ch. 34 he’s

called the “**servant of the Lord.**” He’d served the Lord for at least 80 years. But it seems the one thing this man of God wanted to experience before he died was withheld from him. Flat out, God said, “No.”

I believe Moses lived a good life and died a good death. But one thing is for sure, he teaches us that a good death isn’t without its disappointments. Here, one of the greatest men of God to ever live is denied the one thing he wanted the most. It almost sounds cruel, doesn’t it? Why would God withhold such blessing from a man who had given so much to his cause?

A simple answer to that question is sin. Sin kept him out. The question is, whose sin? If you go way back to ch. 4 you can see that Moses felt it was their sin that was keeping them out. He said, “**Now the LORD was angry with me on your account, and swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance**” (4:21). Three times in the first four chapters he says the same thing, “It’s because of you that God won’t let me in.”

But here at the end of Deuteronomy God says nothing about that. He lays it all on Moses’ back. Numbers 20 tells us what happened. The Israelites were in the wilderness. This was a hard time for Moses. He was stressed out. His sister had just died. The people were badgering him for water. They accused him of leading them out there just to see them die of thirst. Then the Lord gave Moses detailed instructions on what to do. He said to gather the people together and take your staff and speak to the rock and it will pour forth water. But even though God told him to speak to the rock, instead he struck the rock with his staff. He probably did it out anger and frustration at the people. He didn’t just strike it once, but twice. Seems like a little thing, but it was a big thing to God. Because of that God said he wouldn’t be allowed into the Promised Land. And that’s what God says right here in chapter 32. He says, “That’s what did it, Moses. You broke faith with me. You thought you knew better than me. You didn’t treat me holy. That’s why you can’t go in.”

So whose sin was it? Was it the people’s sin? Of course! It was their sin that provoked Moses in the first place. Was it Moses’ sin? Of course! Regardless of what the people did, his job was to obey the Lord. That’s a good lesson for all of us. We all have people in our lives who annoy us, frustrate us, anger us. As a result, we respond sinfully. But we don’t want to take responsibility. We want to blame our sin on their sin. But God says, “Wait a minute. I’m not talking to you about them. I’m talking to you about you.”

Some of us look at this and think, “Man, God sure seems kind of harsh about this. Why can’t he give Moses a break? Nobody’s perfect. Okay, he lost his temper. It could

have been worse.” But we have to understand: sin is sin. Whether it’s in a small matter or a big matter, disobedience is disobedience. I wonder, as you start this new year, has God convicted you of an area of sin? Has God put his finger on an area of your life where you’re compromising? Maybe there is a little voice in your head that argues back, “It’s not that big of a deal. Nobody’s perfect. I can handle this. God understands. And look at so-and-so, he’s so much worse than I am.” Don’t listen to that. That’s a lie. Growing in Christ means change. Change happens as God reveals areas of our lives that are goofed up. When he does that what are we to do? First, we confess our sin and receive his forgiveness. Is that all? No! We turn away from our sin. We repent. Dogs return to their vomit, true believers don’t. We ask God to help us overcome that sin. When God reveals an area of sin, he’ll also give us the strength to overcome it. Maybe not immediately. It may take time. But we can’t take it lightly. The smallest sin is a big deal; big enough that Jesus had to die for it.

Isn’t it something that even a great man like Moses died having to suffer some of the consequences of sin? Even a great man like Moses died with some “loose ends” in his life; some things that just didn’t go like he wanted. Even a great man like Moses died with an ache. You see, even the best death has its disappointments. But there is something else in this story and I think it’s a much louder note. It’s a note of blessing. You see, a good death isn’t without its disappointments but it has its blessings too. Look at seven notes of blessing in Moses death.

II. A good death has its blessings, too.

A. Moses left a legacy of blessing: First of all, Moses left a legacy of blessing. Notice how ch. 33 is sandwiched in-between the narrative of Moses’ death. Chapter 33 starts out, “**Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death.**” Then he goes on and blesses each of the 12 tribes represented there. He takes a lot of time on this. Look how long ch. 33 is. And it’s really a masterpiece of poetry. Look at what he says at the end in v.29, “**Blessed are you, O Israel; Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, Who is the shield of your help, And the sword of your majesty!**” What a beautiful blessing to leave these people with. These are the very people he blamed in ch. 4! Their middle name was “stiff-neck.” But somehow Moses had moved past bitterness into blessing. That’s a good death. A good death leaves a legacy of blessing. All of us should leave a blessing like that. I hate to say it, but some of us will die this year. Don’t you want to be able to look at the people around you and say, “Blessed are you...and here’s why...” To do that some of us will have to move past bitterness. Let me encourage you to

let go of it and start practicing now for a good death by blessing those around you.

B. Moses burial place is unknown: A second note of blessing in Moses' death is that his burial place was unknown. Look again at v.6. It says **"no man knows his burial place to this day."** When you think about it, that's kind of strange. Somebody must have buried him, right? If you're dead you can't bury yourself. And if somebody buried him they would likely know where they did it. So we're almost left with this impression that maybe God did it. There is even an allusion in the New Testament book of Jude that maybe Michael the archangel buried him (Jude 9). We really don't know. But what we do know is that when a great man like Moses died the Jews sometimes would venerate their burial place to the point of idolatry. I agree with those scholars who say the point here is that the man who had warned against idolatry would not become an object of idolatry in his death. That's a blessing. That's a good death.

C. Moses died in good health: The third note of blessing in Moses' death is seen in v.7 where it says, **"Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated."** That means he was in good health. He was healthy enough even to climb the mountain where he died! Most of us would have died climbing the mountain! He was so healthy his eyes were not dim! I'm 52 and my eyes are dim! Moses didn't die of old age; 120 wasn't that old by the standards of that day. He died because the Lord decided it was time for him to die. Up to that point he was healthy as a horse. He was last seen climbing a mountain. That's a blessing. That's a good death. Sometimes we downplay the blessing of good health, but we shouldn't. It's not a bad thing to say at the start of a new year, "I'm going to take better care of my body. I'm going to try to exercise and eat right so my vigor won't be abated! And if I die, I want to die climbing a mountain."

D. Moses was mourned: Moses had a good death. A good death is not without its disappointments but it has its blessings too. The fourth note of blessing in Moses' death is that he was mourned. In v.8 it says **"the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days..."** After Moses died they didn't pack right up and leave for the Promised Land. They took the customary time to mourn and grieve his loss. They wept. That's a good death. I hear a lot of people say, "Oh, I don't want anyone crying at my funeral. I want it to be a celebration." That's a bunch of baloney! I want a lot of people crying at my funeral. I hope you all come and cry your eyes out. If no one cries no one cares! You see, death isn't our friend. The Bible says **"the last enemy to be abolished is death"** (1Cor.15:26). It hasn't been abolished yet and it's still our enemy. The good news is that it will be abolished

because of the victory of Jesus. That's our Easter faith. But, meanwhile, we're still people. We're not ghosts. We have real bodies. When someone dies we miss them; we grieve for them. We want to hold them. And that's the way it should be. A good death is one that's mourned.

E. Moses had a good successor: The fifth note of blessing in Moses' death is that he had a successor. It says in v.9 that **"Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses."** One of the reasons Moses was such a great leader was that he laid the groundwork for the next generation by raising up a young man to take his place. A sad death would be to leave this earth and think all your work will swept away like a sand castle when the next tide comes in. Why? Because you didn't prepare someone to carry on your work. But I have to say, I kind of feel sorry for Joshua. What a tough act to follow. But the Lord equipped him. He was filled with the spirit of wisdom. What a good reminder to all of us that in the Lord's service no one is indispensable or irreplaceable. God's work is always bigger than the best of his workers. And whenever he appoints men and women to his service, he also equips them with what they need to do the job. It's a good death when you can lay your hand on someone and say, "Now it's your turn. God be with you."

F. Moses has a good epitaph: Another note of blessing in Moses' death is that he had a good epitaph. An epitaph is what is said about you when you're gone. Everyone wants a good epitaph. Moses' epitaph was that **"Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face..."** We don't know when this was written. When it says "Since then..." it clearly points to some time in the future when someone looked back over many years and said, "Moses was the man! We've had lots of prophets but none like Moses." The thing that made him special was he knew the Lord "face to face." We know that Moses used to meet with the Lord at the door of the tabernacle. In those times the writer of Exodus wrote, **"The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend"** (Ex.33:11). I was thinking that's another great goal to have for 2009: that you and I would grow so close to the Lord that we might speak to God as a man speaks to a friend. That doesn't mean he's at our level; it just means we know him and we spend time with him and we're intimate with him. That would be a good epitaph to have.

G. Moses saw the land: A good death is not without its disappointments but it has its blessings too. Maybe the best blessing of all was that Moses got to see the land God had promised. It says **"Moses went up from the plains of**

Moab to Mount Nebo... And the LORD showed him all the land..." (34:1). It's important we understand something about that culture. In those days viewing a piece of land was almost the same as taking possession of it. That's why God said to Abraham, **"Lift up your eyes...and look... All the land that you see I will give to you"** (Gen.13:14-15). We also see it in the temptation of Christ where **"the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, 'All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me'"** (Matt. 4:8-9). By looking over the land Moses was given the privilege of legally taking possession of that entire country on behalf of his people. That's why he looks out as far as he can see in every direction. God says, "This land belongs to you even though you personally can't have it now."

As followers of Christ, we're no different than Moses. We have things promised to us, that in a sense belong to us, but we don't get to have them yet. Not everything that we've been given is acquired now. We want everything now. We want all the goodies on this side of heaven. Scripture says we're heirs to a rich inheritance. It's ours, but the fact is some of these riches belong to a land we've yet to enter. Our inheritance includes totally sinless lives, perfectly glorified bodies, peaceful relationships and a clear vision of God that keeps us worshipping all through eternity. It's a sad mistake when we insist that we possess it all now. It is ours, but for now we only get to look!

CONCLUSION

And I believe, like Moses, if we die looking, if we die seeing all that God has given us, if we die trusting that one day it will all be ours, then that's a good death. A good death is not without its disappointments but it has its blessings too. The thing we cannot forget about Moses is that he was only kept out of the land for a time. The day came when even Moses entered the land. Centuries after the people invaded Canaan, the Lord Jesus stood on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Do you recall who was with him? Moses was there and Elijah, too. Now Moses is IN the land. But up there on THAT mountain he had a much greater privilege than inspecting a new land; that day he heard about a new life. He talked with Jesus about all that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem through his death and resurrection. Now the one whom the Lord knew face to face was face to face with the Son of God.

Steven Covey, who wrote the book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says one of the most important things we can do as we set out to accomplish anything is to begin with the end in mind. The idea is to begin with a vision of what you want to accomplish. If you don't know what that is you'll never get there. So here at the beginning of 2009 we have a chance to reflect on our own end as we look at the death of Moses and believe Moses' death shows us that the best way to go, the best death, is to die looking. It's not to attend the Academy Awards, or go on some pilgrimage to Haiti, or run with the bulls in Spain, but rather it's to climb the mountain and see the land. Speaking of the greatest men and women who ever lived, the writer of Hebrews put it this way, **"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth"** (Heb. 11:13). In other words, they died looking. That's a good death.