

Focus (Deuteronomy 4)

If you went on the website this week, then you noticed that I posted a music video from the contemporary Christian band Casting Crowns. The song is titled “Nobody,” and it is the chorus that catches my attention: “I’m just a nobody trying to tell everybody all about Somebody who saved my soul.” This line did not originate with Casting Crowns. You can find similar songs from The Williams Brothers and Allen Frizzell. And my hunch is that we could never find the source of the line; but, in the end, I suppose that is appropriate. He or she was just a nobody trying to tell everybody all about Somebody.

I can’t help but think about that line when I think about Moses. According to Numbers 12:3, “Moses was a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth.” We tend to connect Moses with authority, like the muscular Moses of Michelangelo’s Tomb of Pope Julius II; and this view is justified by his connection with God’s law. Yet there is ample Scriptural evidence to back up the view taken in Numbers. Let me give you a few examples of the humility of Moses.

1. When Moses was called by the Lord at the burning bush, he initially resisted, believing that he lacked the eloquence to speak to the pharaoh and the people. God gave him Aaron to be his mouthpiece, and he did not resist sharing his leadership with his brother.
2. When Israel sinned in the matter of the golden calf, God told Moses that he would destroy the people and make a great nation out of him. But Moses declined this opportunity, and instead he prayed that God would spare the people.
3. When two Israelites began prophesying without Moses’ approval, Joshua wanted Moses to stop them. Instead Moses said, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them” (Num. 11:29).

4. When Moses knew that he would die without entering the promised land, he accepted God's judgement and instead focused on preparing Joshua and the people to enter the land. As he said in our text this morning: "The LORD was angry with me because of you, and he solemnly swore that I would not cross the Jordan and enter the good land the LORD your God is giving you as your inheritance. I will die in this land; I will not cross the Jordan; but you are about to cross over and take possession of that good land. Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you" (vv. 21-23).

I don't think we should call Moses a nobody. But he certainly had the right perspective on himself. As he stood before Israel on the Plains of Moab, his single-hearted focus was to tell everybody about that great Somebody who had saved the people and given them an inheritance in the land of Canaan. He was the great prophet and lawgiver, but Israel and her future were more important to him than his own destiny. And the God who saved them and his purposes were more important than Israel. As they were poised to enter the land, Moses was trying to tell everybody about Somebody.

Deuteronomy 4 concludes the first speech given by Moses in this book. This first speech is made up of a recounting of Israel's history with God, beginning with their departure from Sinai and describing their long sojourn in the wilderness. They are about to enter the land, and Moses has much to say to them.

Moses tells them how to enter their inheritance. "Now, Israel, listen to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (v. 1). In verses 21 & 38, Moses calls the land the inheritance of the people. Interestingly, the same word is used in a slightly different way in verse 20 – "But the LORD selected you and brought you out of Egypt's iron furnace to be a people for his inheritance, as you are today." So, the people were claimed as God's own people and then called to take up residence in the land which he was giving to them. And the key means by which they would receive this inheritance was through their faithfulness to the covenant.

Moses warns them about the danger of idolatry. In verses 15 through 19, Moses presents why the people will be tempted towards idolatry. God did not present any visible form to them during the revelation at Sinai. They would be tempted then to borrow a form from some aspect of creation – an animal or the moon or stars – and then use that form to offer their worship to God. But God cannot be contained in the forms of his creation. And inevitably attempting to confine God to an image would eventually lead the people away from true relationship with God. All idolatry leads to disobedience eventually. Verse 23: “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you and make an idol for yourselves in the shape of anything he has forbidden you.”

Moses gives them a way to interpret their history. In verses 25 through 31, he speaks of what will happen if they give in to idolatry. They will be scattered among the nations. But, even then, if they seek the Lord again, he will be merciful to them and restore them. “[God] will not leave you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them by oath, because the LORD your God is a compassionate God.” Herein we are reminded that the Israelites were not to have a works-based righteousness. God’s forgiveness and compassion were always present to restore them even if they had violated the terms of the covenant. God’s dealings with his people are always gracious.

What is the inspiring summary of the matter? “Today, recognize and keep in mind that the LORD is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Keep his statutes and commands, which I am giving you today, so that you and your children after you may prosper and so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (vv. 39-40).

As they are about to enter the land, we must take account of Moses’s radical God-centeredness. But there is one last matter to note. Just as Moses was a humble man telling them about how to live for God’s glory in the land. **So too were they to be a humble nation telling the whole world about the greatness and glory of God.** They were unique among the nations.

Indeed, ask about the earlier days that preceded you, from the day God created mankind on the earth and from one end of the

heavens to the other: Has anything like this great event ever happened, or has anything like it been heard of? Has a people heard God's voice speaking from the fire as you have, and lived? Or has a god attempted to go and take a nation as his own out of another nation, by trials, signs, wonders, and war, by a strong hand and outstretched arm, by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (vv. 32-34)

And as this unique people entered the land and experienced God's blessing, something would happen to the nations. According to verse six, the nations would be attracted to the wisdom of God's commands and statutes as followed by the people. Here we have a taste of Israel's Abrahamic vocation: they were blessed so that they could extend the blessing of God to the nations. God had designed them to be a nation of nobodies telling everybody about the Somebody who had saved them and loved them.

And where does this leave us? God has saved us in Jesus without reference to our qualifications or merit. Why does God love us? Because he will have mercy upon whom he has mercy. Why does he make us into his people? Because he has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world. We are to be humble, having a true perspective on ourselves just like Moses. And we are to come into our inheritance by obeying the Lord. We are to stand before all the peoples of the world and live in such a way to point everyone to Jesus. This morning we have a unique opportunity to do just this. As we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, we proclaim to the child, his family, and the entire world that our God is a mighty God who claims a people for himself. As the name of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is placed upon this child, we are crying out to everybody who hears – “There is a great Somebody who will rescue you and save you and restore you.” If you hear the words of my voice today, and you know in your heart that you do not have a relationship with Jesus, then my word to you is this – don't let the day end without being reconciled to God. Today you have an opportunity to submit to Jesus as Lord. And he will lead you into your inheritance.