

*The Death of Moses (Deut. 34)*

Comic book fans know that the end of a story is never the end of the story. Sure, one narrative arc can come to an end. But the next issue simply gives us another story. Characters fall in and out of love. People die, but then two years later we discover that the person who died was only a clone and the real character is locked in a secret lab. Part of the brilliance of the medium is finding ways to create satisfying endings in a context in which there is no real ending. In a certain way, this prepares us to read the Bible. The Bible is a book of stories. These stories have beginnings and endings. Old heroes die and new heroes emerge. Locations change. New problems and new possibilities show up. Some people have happy endings (think of Ruth). Some lives end in tragedy (think of Saul). But the ending is never really the ending. Each of the smaller stories is a part of the grand story of redemption that begins with Genesis and ends in Revelation. We are part of that story. Where the history of the Bible ends, the adventure story of the church begins. One day there will be a new heavens and a new earth. But even this ending will only be a new beginning of a kind of life too great and too glorious for our minds to yet conceive.

In our passage this morning, the story of Moses comes to an end. But right where the Moses story ends, the Joshua story begins. Verse nine of our passage indicates a clear transition from the leadership of Moses to the leadership of Joshua. And though Moses steps off stage, the grander story goes on. Yet even Moses remains to make an appearance from time to time. He remains as part of the larger story in three significant ways.

**Prototypical servant.** It is in v. 5 that Moses is designated as “the servant of the LORD.” In Genesis, Abraham was referred to as God’s servant. But remember that Genesis came to Israel through Moses. In many ways, it was Moses who was most readily recognized in the Israelite mind as the prototype of what it meant to be God’s servant. The idea of the “servant of the Lord” will remain a significant theme in biblical theology.

**Prophetic signpost.** Back in the eighteenth chapter, Moses had promised the people that God would raise up another prophet like him. According to the editorial comment of v. 10 of our passage, there had not yet risen a prophet like Moses. The Old Testament will continue to provoke longing for another prophet like Moses. 1400 years later, that prophet will come.

**Powerful lawgiver.** Moses will remain as the lawgiver of God's people, the mediator of the Sinai covenant. His story continues in the story of the people of Israel.

There is another way in which Moses will show back up in our story. But we will save that discussion for a few minutes.

As the Moses story concludes, what can we say about the inheritance of Moses? As we have been making our way through Deuteronomy, I have talked about four categories for understanding the book. **Inheritance** - God had promised the people the land and will bless them and cause them to be a blessing to the nations as they live in the land. **Idolatry** - if the people are to receive all that God has for them, then they must renounce all other deities and ways of life. **Interpretation** - the history of Israel will be judged according to fidelity to the Lord. **Inspiration** - Deuteronomy is a book of encouragement, challenge, and exhortation. How could the great prophet Moses fail in receiving his inheritance? In one sense, of course, he did. He did not enter the land. But let's think carefully here. It seems to me that there are three ways in which Moses was given inheritance.

**He saw the land.** God had instructed Moses to climb to the top of Mt. Nebo so that he might view the land of Canaan before his death. Mt. Nebo is part of a small range of mountains slightly east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. Mt. Nebo rises about 2700 feet above sea level and consequently provides a view of Canaan stretching out to the northwest, west, and southwest. Notice that v. 7 states that though Moses was one hundred and twenty years old his eyes had not grown weak. The condition of the eyes is often a way of speaking of the spiritual condition of the person, but let's take it as literally as possible for the moment. He was a man with strong vision. If it was a clear day, then it is entirely possible for Moses to have seen the extent of the land which his people would inherit. But if we stopped there, I think we would be

missing a crucial detail. Verse one states that the Lord showed Moses the land. Moses did not simply ascend and see. Instead, he was caused to see by God himself. We cannot know exactly what Moses experienced on the mountain, but there is something almost visionary about the event. He did not just see the land. He saw the land with insight that could only come from God's guidance and with God's commentary. He may not have crossed into the land himself, but he was the first to see the entirety of the land as the land of God's people.

**He received God's care.** Moses died upon the mountain. We should see in the simple words of v. 5 that God bestowed upon Moses a singular honor. God himself buried Moses. The creator of the world opened up the ground and placed Moses beneath the dirt. Because Moses's body was not seen and handled by the people, Moses joined a small cadre of people who were bodily taken up by God. First, there was Enoch. Later, Elijah would be directly taken from the earth by the Lord. Unlike these two men, the text explicitly says that Moses died. And it was the Lord who was with Moses when he passed. The uniqueness of the burial highlights the singularity of the individual. To receive such a thing from God must have been a precious experience. It is also important to reflect that Moses's experience here is not substantially different from the other members of the tribe of Levi. The Levites were to be priests and servants of God. When the other tribes inherited land, the Levites were not to have their own inheritance. Instead, the other tribes were to provide places for the Levites to live. Deuteronomy 18:2 states that the Lord alone is their inheritance. To serve God in tabernacle and temple, to teach the law of God, to lead the people in worship, these things were the inheritance of the Levites. Verse ten of our passage states that the Lord knew Moses face-to-face, a phrase denoting not physical but spiritual intimacy. If Moses knew the Lord in such a manner, then what could even the experience of blessing in the land add? The Lord was his inheritance.

**He met the savior.** To understand this point, we have to leave behind the boundaries of the present text. There is a New Testament epilogue to the story of Moses. Hundreds of years later, Jesus stood upon a mountain in the promised land. He only had three of his disciples with him - Peter, James, and John. Matthew 17 and the parallel gospel texts tell us that Jesus was transfigured before their eyes, filled with a heavenly light that radiated out

from him like the rays of the sun. And who joined him upon the mountain? Elijah - one of that small cadre of translated men - came to him. And Moses came to him. Now think about this with me. Traditionally, the site of the transfiguration is identified as Mt. Tabor in Galilee. But even if there is a different location, where did this event take place? To what place did Moses come? He came to Canaan, the land of inheritance. God permitted him to touch the land after all. But when he finally came, he did not have time to contemplate or explore. For he was caught up in conversation with Jesus. He knew that there were more important things going on than even the occupation of the land. According to Luke 9, Moses and Elijah came to speak with Jesus about his coming departure. The Greek word is exodus. They came to speak with him about the liberation he was about to lead from the cross. Do you see? Moses was granted insight not just into the land but into the work of the one to whom all the offices, covenants, sacraments, laws, and land pointed. Moses met the savior.

So, in the end, it seems to me that Moses did not enter the land but he received a precious inheritance. **He saw the land. He received God's care. And he met the savior.** His story ended, and yet his story went on. What can you and I learn from these things? First, don't assume that what we call an ending is a true ending to God. What we see as a time of loss is often enough a place in which God is opening new pathways. What we call an ending is just the start of another chapter in the story that God is telling. Second, I said many weeks ago that we also have an inheritance. God has promised his people a place in the new heavens and new earth. But he has also promised us a foretaste of this heavenly life right now. As we are faithful to the Lord, we can experience his blessing, presence, and power in the midst of our lives here in Hillsdale. In this place and in this time, you have an inheritance from God. But Moses's death reminds us of the heart of the inheritance. Your inheritance from God is not first and foremost about the job that you work. It is not about your house. It is not about your particular set of spiritual gifts. It is not primarily about the unique situations in which the Lord places you. Your inheritance is first and foremost knowing God. Enjoying God. Glorifying God. Having a meaningful relationship with God. This is the heart of the inheritance which you have been given in Jesus Christ.