

God is Faithful

SCOTT HOEZEE

Leaders exercise a peculiar hold over a nation. Although the vast majority of people never actually meet any given president or prime minister, king or queen, people nevertheless come to feel that they know their leaders; and so when a leader dies whole nations can be convulsed with grief. When Franklin D. Roosevelt died suddenly in 1945 of a brain aneurysm, the United States was stunned. When his body was taken by train from Georgia back to Washington, people lined the tracks for miles with men, women, children, and soldiers in uniform openly weeping. Riding on the train, Eleanor Roosevelt said that it was only then that she knew what her husband had meant to millions of people. Well, similarly when Moses died as recorded in the final chapters of Deuteronomy, Israel mourned and grieved the passing of the only leader any of them could ever remember having. Today on Groundwork, we will ponder the death of Moses, but also the overarching faithfulness of God to His people, even in times of loss. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we come today, Dave, to the end of our six-part series on Groundwork, which brings us to the end of not just the Bible's fifth book, but the end of the Pentateuch and the end of a very, very early and significant chapter in the history of God's people.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Moses is about to leave the scene after 40 years of leading the people; and since in the judgment of God really the whole older generation of Israelites has died in the wilderness, and only people younger than a certain age have survived to enter the Promised Land, for most of these people, Moses is the only leader they have ever known.

I mean, I remember buying many years ago a souvenir mug of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. It was her 25th anniversary – her silver jubilee – and that was in 1977, so it has been almost 40 years since her 25th, which means most of the people living today in Britain have never known another ruler. So it is that sort of impact, not just of an important figure, but a lifelong leader now leaving the scene.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So you just grow up associating a certain person with a certain country, and the Israelites, as you said, Dave, did too. We met Moses first way back in Exodus 2. His mother laid him in that little reed basket in Egypt and he quickly rose to become Israel's leader – the leader of the Exodus – and so he has been the dominant figure in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – four of the five first books of the Bible – it is all Moses all the time, but now the time of his departure is drawing near.

DAVE BAST

You know, Moses really is an important part in a trajectory of what we like to call salvation history – really, the story of the Bible. It is not just a collection of Bible characters, you know, from Sunday school books; but it is the story of what God is doing to prepare a people who will prepare the way for God Himself to enter the world, and for the salvation, ultimately, of the nations. It is not just about Israel. So Moses has a key role to

play in this larger story whose trajectory leads straight toward the Lord Jesus Christ and beyond; but now his chapter in the story is coming to an end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Precisely because he is such a pivotal player in that larger story, Dave, God has to treat him a little bit differently; and in Moses' case, unfortunately, as we are reminded now in Deuteronomy Chapter 32, Moses is not going to get to enter the Promised Land; and so we read these words in Deuteronomy 32:

⁴⁸On that same day, the Lord told Moses, ⁴⁹“Go up into the Abarim range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. ⁵⁰There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. ⁵¹This is because both of you broke faith with Me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Maribah Kadesh in the dessert of Zin, and because you did not uphold My holiness among the Israelites, therefore you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.”

DAVE BAST

And that is a reminder that Moses seems to get a bit of a raw deal here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It sure feels like it, right?

DAVE BAST

God says to him: Stop, Moses, time out. You don't get to go in because you did something that I didn't like and as a punishment all you can do is look at the land, but you cannot enter it yourself. It is kind of like, wait a minute... one little thing that he does wrong, 40 years of faithfulness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; one time... and we remember, and maybe we can review this a minute, Dave; from Numbers 20, one of a couple different occasions when the people needed water; there was a time when God told Moses to strike a rock and water gushed out, but in Numbers 20 God says: Speak to it – speak to the rock; but Moses is having a really bad day, so let's listen to what happens there.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we read in Numbers Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence just as He commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock, and Moses said to them:

^{10b}Listen, you rebels! Must we bring you water out of this rock? ¹¹Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out and the community and their livestock drank, ¹²but the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in Me enough to honor Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so there it is; and we will think more about this also in the next segment. So, Moses lost his cool; he was having a bad day; he was angry with the people who have just whined on and on and complained, complained, and complained on and on. So he has had it, so he strikes the rock; but again, is that such a big deal? I mean, the entire Israelite community committed worse sins than that, including in front of the golden calf not long before that incident in Numbers 20 happened, but God forgave them at Moses' begging God, God did forgive them for that terrible sin by the golden calf, so why not Moses? Why couldn't God just say: Well, you blew it one time, Buddy, but you know, forgive and forget. You are My special guy. Given everything you have gone through, I understand, so we will let it go. But no, God says to Moses and Aaron, actually: You did not uphold My holiness, so I cannot let that go.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and there is also the fact to consider that Moses held a different position than simply one of the gang – one of the people of Israel. Moses was a leader; Moses was *the* leader; and as such, he is going to be held to a slightly different standard, and that is just the way it is; and though God may have forgiven him, He did not necessarily excuse him from some of the consequences of his sinful act; and we are going to explore that a little more deeply and in detail in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this final program of a six-part series on the book of Deuteronomy, which, Dave, has brought us right to the end of Deuteronomy, to Chapter 32, and in a little while we are going to hear from Chapter 34, which is the final chapter of Deuteronomy; and we were asking the question: Why was it such a big deal in the story we first read in Numbers Chapter 20 that Moses struck a rock that God had told him only to speak to? Moses lost his cool, struck the rock, and there is this huge consequence 40 years later almost now that God says: I haven't forgotten that you did that, and that is why you cannot go into the land. You have brought them to the brink of the Promised Land, but you aren't going in. You can see it from the mountain in the distance, but there you are going to die; and we have been asking why? Why couldn't God just let bygones be bygones and just forgive Moses and let him go into the land with everybody else? There is something significant about Moses, and there is something significant about holiness that we need to think about.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right, absolutely. It seems like too harsh a punishment, and I think even to begin with that is a word we should maybe pause and reflect on: Does God punish His people for their sins or disobedience? In a sense, I don't think that is true. I think theologically we would say God has taken the punishment on Himself; but there is another concept that the Bible uses that it calls *discipline*, and it means that sometimes we will experience consequences because of our behavior, because of the things that we have done, especially if we happen to hold leadership roles or a special office. There could be consequences that God permits to continue even when He forgives the guilt and doesn't technically punish us for it; and I think that is the kind of thing we are dealing with here. You mentioned something about Moses and something about God – namely God's holiness – and that is, I think, where we can explore what is the message God is sending here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think it is clear that what distinguished Moses and his action there in striking the rock instead of speaking to it was that this happened in front of everybody, and it is Moses, the most famous man in Israel; and what God basically says in Numbers 20, but it was repeated, we just read it in the first segment from Deuteronomy Chapter 32: You didn't uphold My holiness; and nothing is more important. Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord your God. That is the great slogan of the book of Leviticus, and Moses was the person who was the spokesperson, the prophet that we thought about in the previous program in this series; Moses was the prophet. He articulated the will of God for the people of God, and nothing he ever said was more important than that holiness matters and you have to be holy. So when Moses, the leader, does not act in a holy way, he brings God down. He brings God's holiness down, and that is such a big deal, especially for a leader, that God cannot just wink it away and say: Well, that is not such a big deal.

DAVE BAST

Yes; interestingly, too, God says here in Deuteronomy: You broke faith with Me and did not uphold My holy... You broke faith with Me; and if you listen to the story as we read it again... we read the actual words from Numbers so to get them in our minds. Moses says to the people when he is having his bad-hair day: Must we bring water for you out of this rock? In other words, it is up to Aaron and me again. That is when he brought God's holiness down. It was when he put himself forward as the problem solver, as the magic man, as the one who could provide for them; and pushed God, in a sense, into the background. So it was not just disobeying a technical thing of he struck instead of he spoke, it was sort of usurping the place of God; and a

really serious thing; especially because he was a leader.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and especially because God made it clear. What is all this holiness about, right? At the end of Exodus God's glory enters the tabernacle. So they follow the instructions in Exodus and God's glory enters the tabernacle; it is the climax of the book of Exodus, out there in the wilderness, as a symbol that God wanted to live in the midst of His people. God wanted to dwell with them, but He made it clear: Look, I am holy – I am a holy God; I cannot hang around with unholy people all the time; My reputation is going to be besmirched; if I hang out with unholy people, nobody is going to believe that I am a holy God, so you people have to behave in My ways so that I can stay among you. So when the leader of Israel, Moses in this case, usurps God's authority – disobeys God in front of the people – besmirches God's holiness in front of the people – that is as serious as it gets; and again, because he is a leader.

You know, I think we have used this illustration on a previous Groundwork program, but it bears repeating. It is sad and tragic if the neighbor down the street where you live has an adulterous affair, and maybe it threatens his marriage and his family; it wounds his wife, it wounds his children; maybe the marriage survives, maybe it doesn't; but it is sad, it is tragic when it happens to Phil Johnson or whoever down the block; but when it happens to, let's say, a president of the United States...

DAVE BAST

Or maybe a pastor of a church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; now it is much more dire because so many more people know about it, and it hurts so many more people; it hurts an entire nation; when a president has an affair the whole world knows about it. People out in the Outback get the news eventually; so there is just so much more on the line. The same thing for the pastor of a congregation. It maybe doesn't seem fair, but that is the way it goes.

DAVE BAST

But, it brings God's name into greater disrepute, and it encourages more people to go out and do the same, and that is what makes it more serious. So it seems like a really sad note, doesn't it, on which Moses' life is going to end. God throws back at him this one incident from 38 years before – or 40 years before – whenever it was, and he is not allowed to go into the land, and he has to go up there on the mountain and he sort of wistfully looks out at it. It is like he is up in an airplane looking out at this place where he can never set foot, and he can only dream about what it would be like to reach the Promised Land; and Moses actually will die outside the land, like the whole disobedient generation has done, he joins them in their fate, and all we can say is wow, what a sad thing for the great life of Moses to end on this note? Is that it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

What a shame, and the whole Pentateuch is going to end this way? The first five books of the Bible? So, it looks, if you were to stop reading at the end of Deuteronomy 32, it looks like kind of a sad, anticlimactic ending to the life of a great leader, but in just a moment we are going to go to the actual end of Deuteronomy, which is the 34th chapter; and what we will see there gives us some hope and some joy after all; and in our final segment there is one other thing that happens before the Bible is finished that also shows the goodness of God even in the face of loss. We will think about that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we just said, Dave, that we want to go to the true end of the book of Deuteronomy, which is also, as we said, the end of the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible – and

that is Chapter 34, and let's listen to these words. Moses now has climbed up Mount Nebo as he was instructed, and we read this.

DAVE BAST

⁴Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I said I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." ⁵And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. ⁶He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor; but to this day no one knows where his grave is. ⁷Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. ⁸The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab 30 days until the time of weeping and mourning was over. ⁹Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses. ¹⁰Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, ¹¹who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. ¹²For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. And thus ends the book of Deuteronomy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There it ends; and as we just said, Dave, despite the enduring fact that indeed Moses is not going into the Promised Land... he committed that sin; God is not going to overlook it; this is the consequence; there is still a tenderness to this account, right; that God whisks Moses away, buries him with his own hands – of whom else in history can that ever have been said, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I don't know of any that were...

DAVE BAST

How did that work out, yes?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, of course, at the very end Moses is celebrated; and since we believe that the Bible is God's inspired book, we know that God inspired those words of celebration of Moses; so it doesn't end on a bitter note – it doesn't end on a tragic note – it ends with some tenderness and some joy over this wonderful servant of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and clearly these words were written by somebody other than Moses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I mean, traditionally the first five books are ascribed to the authorship of Moses; they are called the books of Moses; but most certainly I would say there was an editor at work in putting together the various parts and stories of these books.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a verse near the end of Deuteronomy that we didn't read that says that Moses was the most humble man who ever lived. Well, if you really are humble, you cannot write that...

DAVE BAST

You cannot write that, right. Somebody else is kind of wrapping up the loose ends and telling the end of the story; and as you said, Scott, the word *poignance* comes to mind here. A tenderness of God still holding Moses in His hands – still loving him. So clearly he has been forgiven. He is not being punished.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and sandwiched in here, too, is Joshua; the new leader is being raised up. Moses, as it were, transferred his authority and power onto Joshua, and we know that he will become the next great leader of Israel. So as the Pentateuch comes to an end and as Deuteronomy comes to an end, there is this hope of God's faithfulness even in a time of loss – even in a time of death of a great leader – and that is something we all, I think, can take comfort in. We all know the peaks and valleys of life. We all experience loss of different kinds: Loss of a job, loss of a spouse, loss of a child. Terrible things happen, and sometimes great leaders die or a beloved pastor dies or leaves for another congregation and we feel bereft, but there is this hope of faithfulness, that God is still there, God is still at work.

DAVE BAST

Well, and there is a forward thrust to the work of God and the faithfulness of God. I don't know if you picked up on this, but one of the lines that struck me as I was reading these verses again, the phrase that the writer uses in verse 10: Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face; and there is a reminder of that scene on Mount Sinai when Moses actually did come, figuratively speaking, face to face with God. I mean, he had such direct contact with God that we learn later in the Bible he had to put a veil over his face when he came down because it dazzled the people. So there was nobody like him, and there is a sense that we don't know when this writer was actually writing these words; sometime much later in Israel's history, but he says...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It could have been post-exile.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he says there was never anybody since then like Moses, as if there never will be; but there *will* be somebody even greater than Moses. That is the forward movement; who not only spoke to God face to face, but was the living face of God in the flesh as Jesus comes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And speaking of Moses knowing God face to face, let's flash forward a thousand years to something we can read, among other places in the Gospels, Mark 9:2:

After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There He was transfigured before them. ³His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them; ⁴and there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. So, Mount Nebo and God's secret burial of Moses is not Moses' last appearance in the Bible. He pops up here with the ultimate prophet of God, Jesus; and guess what? Just like on Mount Sinai, Moses is speaking face to face with God – the Son of God, Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is Jesus whose appearance now dazzles us in what we call the transfiguration, as Jesus is... for a moment His true glory is revealed. It shines through the hiddenness of His human nature. Peter and James and John are witnesses to who Jesus really is, and they see Elijah and Moses, the Prophets and the Law, the whole Old Testament, conversing with Jesus as it were pointing us to Jesus, who is *the* great prophet – the one greater by far – infinitely greater than Moses himself – God's last word to the whole world – to the human family.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a reminder, too, that even as Moses' life came to an end, as we have seen that in Deuteronomy 34, at the end of this series on Deuteronomy, God was definitely up to something all along, and He was up to something more than anybody could imagine – greater than anyone could possibly imagine – through also Moses we are brought right up to Jesus, and to our ultimate savior, and I think that, as we said just a minute ago, what a great reminder to us in times of our own grief – in times of our own disorientation – God is always up to something, and it is always going to ultimately come to God is up to something through Jesus, now, and through Christ our Lord, and seeing Moses conversing with Jesus is a reminder of that larger story in which we all take our parts.

DAVE BAST

Right; well, and just the succession of leaders who all do God's work in their season of life – in their generation. So Moses is going to pass off the scene into the hands of the Lord; Joshua is raised up to succeed him, and so it goes. God's ministers – God's leaders – come and go, but the work goes on – the ministry goes on until the end when the Lord Jesus Himself will return and make all things new. That is the story that we believe and that gives us hope.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. Visit our website, groundworkonline.com, to suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/god-is-faithful>

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