

Mount Nebo

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, could we turn to Deuteronomy chapter 32.

Deuteronomy chapter 32, it's on page 210 in the Pew Bible. So, Deuteronomy chapter 32, and we're just reading the verses 48 down to the end of the chapter.

Deuteronomy 32 at verse 48. That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, in the waters of Meribah, Kadesh, in the wilderness of Sin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

For you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there, into the land that I am giving to the people of Israel. Go up this mountain, Mount Nebo.

I'm sure that we're all familiar with the name Martin Luther King. Because Martin Luther King, he was, first of all, a Christian minister, but he was also a leader of the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 60s.

[1 : 55] And even though we may not have been old enough at the time, or some of us, like myself, we weren't even born, yet we're all familiar with his most famous speech in 1963, where Martin Luther King said, I have a dream.

And his dream was to see the United States devoid of segregation and racism. But when you listen to Martin Luther King, you can see that he was a great defender of the civil rights movement, but he was also a great orator.

He was a great speaker. That was until his assassination on the 4th of April 1968, at the age of only 39. But what's remarkable is that the day before his death, on the 3rd of April 1968, Martin Luther King was giving a speech entitled, I've been to the mountaintop.

I've been to the mountaintop. And in his speech, Martin Luther King, he recounted all the reforms that had taken place over the past number of years, where he had been leading the civil rights movement.

And he talks about all the threats that had been made against his life. But Martin Luther King, he concluded his last public speech with these words.

[3 : 14] He says, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with 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 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.

And they were the last public words of Martin Luther King before his death. I've been to the mountaintop. I've been to the mountaintop. And you know, those famous last words of Martin Luther King, they parallel the experience of Moses.

Because like Martin Luther King, Moses' famous last words could have been, I've been to the mountaintop. I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.

[4 : 21] And you know, as we read, Moses had been to the mountaintop of Mount Nebo, which was the last mountaintop experience that he would have prior to his death.

And this evening, as you know, we're continuing our study or our series of mountaintop experiences. Because as we said before, mountains are repeatedly mentioned throughout the Bible.

And many of the well-known characters in the Bible, they all had mountaintop experiences. And each mountaintop experience, it provides for us these significant moments and markers in the story of the Bible, the story of redemption.

We saw that with Noah on Mount Ararat. We saw it with Abraham on Mount Moriah. We saw it last time again with Moses on Mount Sinai, where Moses, he had three mountaintop experiences on Mount Sinai.

But what I want us to think about this evening is that Moses had a further two mountaintop experiences before his untimely death. And I'd like us to think about these mountaintop experiences under three headings.

[5 : 29] The banishment of Moses, the brother of Moses, and the burial of Moses. The banishment of Moses, the brother of Moses, and the burial of Moses.

So if we look first of all at the banishment, the banishment of Moses. We'll read again in verse 48 in this chapter. That very day, the Lord spoke to Moses, go up this mountain of the Abiram, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I'm giving to the people of Israel for a possession, and die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people as Aaron, your brother, died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah, Kadesh, in the wilderness of Sin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. Now when we come to the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites, they've all gathered together now at the banks of the river Jordan. Forty years have passed since they were delivered from bondage and slavery in Egypt, and their forty years of wandering through the wilderness, it's now come to its conclusion as the Israelites now stand on the border of the promised land.

And as they gather together, they reach a number of about two and a half million people, and they're on the threshold, this threshold of a new beginning. They're on the threshold of a new start in life.

Slavery in Egypt and wandering through the wilderness, it's all now behind them, and the promised land is right in front of them. But as they all gather together, the Lord commanded Moses to remind the Israelites of all that they've been through, and how the Lord had remained faithful to them throughout their forty-year wilderness journey.

[7 : 26] And you know, in many ways, that's what the entire book of Deuteronomy is about. Deuteronomy is Moses' sermon to the Israelites, where he reminds the Israelites of the Lord's faithfulness towards them in the past, and the assurance and the promise of the Lord's continued faithfulness in the future as they move forward into the promised land.

And as you can imagine, it was a poignant moment for the children of Israel, because as you know, their past had been filled with sin and sickness and suffering and even sorrow.

And as they set their face towards this new beginning in the promised land, they knew that their future was unknown. But they sought to move forward in the promise that the Lord who was with them in the past would be the Lord who's still with them as they go forward into the future.

And you know, my friend, we can actually cling to that same promise tonight. Because, you know, despite all the changes that take place in our circumstances and our situations, the wonderful truth is the Lord never changes.

His promises remain the same for us. They remain the same yesterday, today, and forever. And like the Israelites, you might look back and see sins and sicknesses and sufferings and sorrows in the past and even the heartache and the hurt it caused.

[8 : 56] But maybe tonight, despite all that you've been through and all that has changed maybe in your family and even in your own health, you know one thing for sure.

The Lord has been faithful and His promises have been through and His presence has been made known to you and He has granted to you that grace to help in your time of need.

Despite all that may have gone on in the past, you know the Lord is still with you in the present and as you move forward into the future. But, you know, for Moses, as he comes to the conclusion of a sermon to the Israelites, and just before he pronounces his benediction of blessings upon the Israelites in chapter 33, Moses explains to the Israelites that he has come this far but he's to go no further.

And, you know, it must have been so hard for Moses to preach his final sermon to the Israelites and tell them that he's not going to enter the promised land with them because of his disobedience.

And it must have been the greatest disappointment to Moses because the Lord had mightily used Moses to deliver the Israelites from bondage and slavery in Egypt.

[10 : 16] Moses, you could say, Moses had been a prophet. He had proclaimed to Pharaoh with all these warnings and plagues to let my people go.

Moses had acted even like a priest interceding on behalf of the Israelites during all the successes, the sins, the sufferings, the sorrows, and even the struggles of the wilderness journey. And Moses had even acted like a king, leading the Israelites out of Egypt through the Red Sea and on towards the promised land. But sadly, because of his disobedience, Moses was banished and barred from crossing the river Jordan and entering the promised land. And the reason for not allowing Moses to enter the promised land is given to us there in verse 51. The Lord says, it's because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the wilderness of sin and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

The reason Moses wasn't going to enter the promised land was because of what happened only a few months earlier in the wilderness of sin. And we read about that incident in Numbers chapter 20 where the Israelites, they were complaining against Moses because they had no water to drink. [11:42] And they questioned Moses. They were saying to Moses, why have you brought us out into this wilderness to die? Why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this wretched place?

But you know, what's remarkable is that 40 years earlier at the beginning of their wilderness journey when the Israelites were in the same location they were making the same complaint that they had no water to drink.

That's what we read about in Exodus 17. The Israelites, they had only just left Egypt when they arrived in the wilderness of sin. And in the previous chapter, chapter 16, they were complaining about not having anything to eat.

They wanted manna. But now in chapter 17, the Israelites were complaining that they had no water to drink. And in their anger, in their anger, they were about to stone Moses.

They were quarreling with Moses. They were testing the Lord's faithfulness. In fact, that's why Moses named the place Meribah and Massah. Meribah means quarreling.

[12:48] Massah means testing. And it was there at Massah and Meribah that the Israelites quarreled with Moses and they tested the Lord's faithfulness. Now, on that occasion in Exodus 17, when they had just come out of Egypt, the very beginning of their wilderness journey, it was then that the Lord commanded Moses to strike the rock with a staff so that water would come out of the rock.

And when Moses did that, the water came out. But 40 years later, with the Israelites in the same location, making the same complaint, the Lord commanded Moses in Numbers chapter 20 to speak to the rock so that water would flow out of the rock.

But in his anger and his frustration and his disappointment with the Israelites, we read that Moses, he grabbed his staff and instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck the rock, not once, but twice. And you know, we might be tempted to think that striking the rock instead of speaking to it, well, it's not that big a deal. And it's certainly not worth banishing Moses from entering into the promised land.

Surely not. But we'll think about that. We'll think more about the banishment of Moses in a moment when we come to consider the brother of Moses. But you know, what ought to stand out for us here between this 40 year repetition, what ought to stand out for us is that even though 40 years of wandering in the wilderness had passed, it seems that the Israelites hadn't learned to listen to God's servant or trust the Lord.

[14:34] Because as the Israelites stood in the same location, making the same complaint, quarreling with Moses and testing the Lord again, you know, in 40 years of wandering through the wilderness towards the promised land, it seemed that the Israelites hadn't learned anything.

And you know, we can often condemn the Israelites for how they disobeyed the Lord with their idolatry and their complaining. We can often criticize the Israelites for always nagging Moses and slandering him and even rebelling against Moses.

We can often condemn and criticize the Israelites thinking that surely in 40 years of going through the wilderness, they would have learned something instead of just going round in circles all the time.

But you know, my Christian friend, is it not the case that the more you go on in your wilderness journey, the more you realize that you are just like the Israelites? because if you're anything like me, then you make the same mistakes and you make them in the same location and you have the same complaints and you have the same concerns and the same cares about everything and you keep

bringing them all back to the Lord.

You keep questioning the Lord's faithfulness all the time. You know, my Christian friend, we are more like the Israelites than we care to realize. But the thing is about the Bible, the Bible emphasizes to us that we're not to take comfort from our similarity to the disobedient Israelites.

[16:17] Because as Paul warned us in 1 Corinthians 10, he said, we're to learn from the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. They are there in the Bible for us to learn from them, not to act like them.

And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, 1 Corinthians 10, he says, these things happened as examples for us. That we should not crave evil things as they also craved.

Don't be idolaters, he says, as some of them were. Don't act immorally as they did. Don't test the Lord as they did. Don't grumble as they did. Because these things happened to the Israelites as an example and they were written for our instruction.

Therefore, says Paul, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. And you know, in relation to this one commentator, he gives us some very direct application.

And I'll just read what he wrote. He says, Paul used this episode to warn the church not to act like the Israelites did in their unfaithfulness. The Israelites despised the leaders whom God had placed over them.

[17:32] Then he asks, do you do that? Do you complain and grumble about your pastor? The Israelites despised how God had abundantly taken care of them up to this point because they were only concerned about their immediate needs.

Are you like that? He says. Do you forget how God has brought you from darkness to light and cared for you all these years? The Israelites, he says, even despised the place where they were living in the wilderness.

Does that describe you? Do you despise your lot in life or are you thankful in all circumstances? You know, they're challenging questions for us to think about as we continue on our wilderness journey.

And so we've considered the banishment of Moses, but secondly, the brother of Moses. The brother of Moses. It reads here in verse 49. Go up this mountain of the Abiram, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I'm giving to the people of Israel for a possession, and die on the mountain which you go up and be gathered to your people as Aaron, your brother, died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.

Now as Moses came to the conclusion of his farewell sermon on the border of the promised land, he explained to the people there that he was going to die not only in the same way as his brother, but also because of the same sin as his brother.

[19:08] Because as we said, when the Israelites, when they came all the way back round to Meribah and Massah after 40 years of Moses and Aaron leading them through the wilderness, the Israelites, they came to the same location and they started making the same complaint and the Lord commanded Moses, as we read in Numbers 20, he commanded him to speak to the rock so that water would flow out of the rock.

But in his anger and his frustration and even his disappointment with the Israelites because they'd learned nothing and they weren't listening and they were still complaining, Moses grabs his staff and instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes the rock not once, but twice.

And you know, it's safe to say that Moses, he was so frustrated and so fed up with the Israelites that when they quarreled with Moses and tested the Lord and his faithfulness in the same location with the same complaint as 40 years earlier, you know, it's safe to say Moses saw red.

He lost control. Moses just lashed out and he said things that he would later regret and he did something that would have lasting consequences for him.

But you know, we've all been there, my friend, haven't we? We've all been there. We've all been in that place where we've become so frustrated and maybe even angry with our circumstances and our situations and we've seen red and we've lashed out and said things we shouldn't say and maybe even done things we shouldn't have done and things that we would later regret.

[20:51] We've all been there. We've all done it. Well, I've done it anyway. I don't know about you. Maybe you're all calm. But you know, on the other hand, and this challenges me, as God's servant and as a leader of God's people, you would expect more from him.

You would expect Moses to keep us cool when he's leading all these people. You would expect Moses to act calmly as the servant of God.

You would expect Moses in many ways to act professionally as someone who was God's representative. But as J.C. Ryle often said, the best of men are only men at best.

And that was true of Moses as it's true of all of God's servants. But as we said earlier, we might be tempted to think that when Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, that it wasn't really a big deal.

Because, well, everybody makes mistakes, don't they? And in comparison to all the disobedient and sinful things that we do in a day, surely it's not, surely hitting a rock isn't worth banishing Moses and Aaron from crossing the river Jordan into the promised land.

[22 : 10] But, you know, and again, this really challenges me as a minister, Moses and Aaron were the servants of God. And their responsibility was to lead God's people to the promised land.

But the Lord had commanded Moses, and this is the really interesting bit, he commanded Moses and Aaron to speak to the rock. But they didn't.

Moses struck the rock twice, while Aaron remained silent. They were both to speak to the rock. And because they both didn't do as they were commanded, the Lord said to both Moses and his brother, because you have not believed me to treat me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.

My friend, as God's servants and leaders of God's people, Moses and Aaron were a poor example and a poor witness to the Israelites.

One commentator says, I can't remember, I think he's Currid, I can't remember his first name. He says, God accused Moses and Aaron of two things. The first is the sin of unbelief, which resulted in treating God as unholy.

[23 : 27] The second is that they were a poor witness to the Israelites of the holiness and power of God. Both Moses and Aaron acted publicly in a shameful way.

And it's not that Aaron is merely guilty by association. He too is culpable because he didn't speak to the rock as he was commanded. My friend, it was because of their denial of God's holiness and their disobedience to God's word that the Lord removed both Aaron and Moses from their office as the leaders of God's people.

And you know, it makes me think that if God took sin seriously, then as a church, so should we. If God dealt with his servants seriously, then as a church, so should we. And if God removed his disobedient servants from office, regardless of how long they'd been there and how much they'd done, then as a church, so should we.

Because you know, there's one thing that this passage tells us very clearly. God is not mocked. God is not mocked.

[24 : 50] And you know, as the brother of Moses and the high priest of the people of Israel, you know, it must have been a humiliating experience for Aaron to be removed from office.

Aaron was the only Persian in the two and a half million Israelites. He was the only one who was allowed to enter into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

Aaron had such a privileged position, but he abused his position. And he was given this mountaintop experience, but it wasn't the mountaintop experience he expected.

Because he was going to die on the top of Mount Hor. Now, Mount Hor is situated in the land of Edom. It stands nearly 1,500 metres above sea level.

The locals refer to Mount Hor as Jabal Nefi Harun, which means the mountain of the prophet Aaron. And to this day there's a shrine built on the top or the summit of the mountain, which is said to cover or be directly on top of the tomb of Aaron.

[25 : 58] But you know, it must have been such a sad day to have the high priest stripped of his clerical clothing. For as you know, Aaron's office was distinguished by his high priestly garments, the turban and all the gems that were on his breastpiece.

And as we read in Numbers 20, they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And after Moses had stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar, Aaron died there on the mountaintop.

Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. In Numbers 33, we didn't read it, but we're given a little more detail about the death of Aaron. We're told, Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor at the command of the Lord and died there in the fortieth year after the people of Israel had come

out of the land of Egypt on the first day of the fifth month.

And Aaron was one hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor. But you know, as Moses brought his farewell sermon to its conclusion, he also spoke about his own burial, which is what I want us to consider lastly.

The burial of Moses. We've looked at the banishment of Moses, the brother of Moses, but then lastly, the burial of Moses. The burial of Moses.

[27 : 26] If you'll turn over the page to chapter 34, and read there from the beginning. Deuteronomy 34 from the beginning.

Then 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, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the plain that is the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zohar.

And the Lord said to him, this is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.

Deuteronomy 34, it gives to us the account of what happened to Moses when he went to the top of Mount Nebo. And you know, it would have been such an emotional experience for the Israelites, having only just lost the brother of Moses, Aaron, their high priest, they lost him four months earlier round in the land of Edom.

And now they're going to lose their deliverer and their leader who had been with them for 40 years. He's now going to be taken from them. And yet, despite his denial of God's holiness and disobedience to God's word, the Lord allows Moses in his grace and mercy, he allows Moses a glimpse of the promised land, the promised land which Moses longed to see.

[29 : 07] And so the Lord told Moses, climb your last mountain. Climb your last mountain. And before his death, Moses was to climb the 710 metres to the top of Mount Nebo in order to view the whole of the promised land.

And you know, it must have been a solemn moment for the children of Israel to be standing there. These two and a half million people, and they had been listening to Moses' farewell sermon at the banks of the river Jordan.

And when he finishes his sermon, you can almost imagine him, Moses, the servant of God, he leaves his pulpit where he had preached his farewell sermon. He says goodbye to his family, his children, and then he takes that lonely walk towards Mount Nebo.

death. And you know, it's a reminder to us that even for the servant of God, death is an experience that we all have to face by ourselves.

Because we can't take our family with us. We can't take our friends with us. We can't take the elders with us. We can't take the minister with us.

[30 : 24] Like Moses, for all of us, death will be an experience which we all have to face by ourselves. We all have to climb our last mountain by ourselves.

But you know, for the Christian, for the people of God, for the servants of God, although we have to face the last enemy, death, by ourselves, we don't do it alone.

We have to face death with nobody else in this world, but we don't do it alone. No, the Lord is with us. Is that not the promise of the Good Shepherd?

Is that not the promise our elder John Murdo had when he faced death? Yea, though I walk in death's dark veil, yet will I fear none ill, for thou art with me and thy rod, and staff me comfort still. Do you know, my unconverted friend, if you face death without the Good Shepherd, you'll have to face the last enemy, all alone.

[31 : 39] And for you as someone who's unconverted, he will be a real enemy, because for the Christian, the last enemy has been defeated, but you know, if we enter eternity all alone without Jesus, we will remain in eternity all alone.

It's one of the frightening things of hell. You're all alone. But Moses wasn't alone. The Lord was with him every step of the way.

Now, we're not to think that because Moses didn't enter the promised land, he wasn't saved. that's not what we're being told in the Bible. Moses entered glory.

We'll see that in a few weeks time when we see him on the Mount of Transfiguration. But Moses, he wasn't to enter the promised land. He was given a vision or a panoramic view of the promised land.

And he was to see it from Mount Nebo. He was given this panoramic view of the whole land of Israel. He was able to see, as we read there in chapter 34, he was able to see as far as Dan in the north, all the way to Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Judah, right down in the south.

[33 : 02] He was given this panoramic view of the promised land. A land which had been promised centuries earlier to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob. And there's Moses, he's witnessing the promise.

And he's realizing, despite his unfaithfulness, the Lord has been faithful, faithful to his people. He's always faithful to his promise.

So Moses, we're told in verse 5, 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 one knows the place of his burial to this day.

Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed and his vigour unabated. Even though Moses was removed from his office as the servant and leader of the Lord's people, the Lord did something that he did for no one else in history.

He buried Moses. As you know and as you're well aware that a burial is often organised and carried out by a family. It's the family of the loved one who bury their loved one.

[34 : 20] But in this instance we're told that God buried Moses. God buried Moses, which highlights to us the intimate relationship which the Lord had with Moses. In fact, the Bible affirms to us that the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend.

And it seems that the reason no one knows the place of Moses' burial is so that it wouldn't become a place of worship. Because if they built a shrine over the tomb of Aaron, who knows what they would have built over the tomb of Moses.

But God buried Moses. And you know, it's safe to say that Moses had many mountaintop experiences. And yet, even though Mount Nebo was the last mountain Moses had to climb, it wasn't the last mountaintop experience that Moses had.

Because Moses, as you know, he did stand in the promised land, but not physically. Moses stood in the promised land spiritually when he had this wonderful mountaintop experience with Jesus and Elijah and all the disciples, or three of the disciples, on the top of the mount of transfiguration.

And we'll consider that mountain maybe in a few weeks' time. But on Mount Nebo, where Moses died, those famous last words of Martin Luther King, they certainly parallel the experience of Moses.

[35 : 52] I've been to the mountaintop, I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us.

Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for thy word, that we have this wonderful privilege of being able to study it, and we give thanks, Lord, that it is new to us each morning.

Help us, Lord, even to come to thy word each day and to say, Lord, speak to me, for thy servant is listening, and Lord, that we would listen to thy truth, and to know that even though it is old, it is ever new, that we are a God who is able to refresh our soul, and to encourage us, and to equip us, even for the week that lies ahead.

A week, Lord, that is unknown to any of us, but Lord, we commit and we commend ourselves, and others, those in our home and our family, we commit them into thy care, and thy keeping.

Lord, bless us then, we pray, go before us, guide us, and keep us, for we ask it in Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen. We're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 81.

[37 : 12] Psalm 81. Psalm 81 in the Scottish Psalter, page 335.

We're singing from verse 9 down to the verse marked 12. This is another psalm that speaks about the rebellion at Massa and Meribah. Psalm 81.

This is Peter's favourite psalm, just to let you know. And we're singing at verse 9. In the midst of thee there shall not be any strange God at all, nor unto any God unknown thou bowing down shalt fall.

I am the Lord thy God which did from Egypt land thee guide. I'll fill thy mouth abundantly. Do thou it open wide. Down to the verse Mark 12 of Psalm 81 to God's praise.

Him. In the midst of thee there shall not be any strange God at all, nor unto any God unknown, the rain shall fall.

[38 : 46] I am the Lord thy God which did from Egypt land thee bright.

I'll fill I'll fill thy mouth abundantly. Do thou it open wide.

But yet my people my voice would not attend to be and in my chosen Israel he would have none of me.

So to the last of their own hearts I them deliver and deliver it and then in counsels of my road they may wander it.

the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more Amen.