

**“All Fall Short”**  
**Deuteronomy 3:21-29**  
**October 31, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

We continue this morning in the book of Deuteronomy, with Moses preaching to the second exodus generation of Israel, on the edge of the promised land.

Having recapped some of the history that brought them to this point, Moses now looks to the future, as Israel will enter into the land that God has promised to them.

With that in mind, we turn to Deuteronomy 3:21-29.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said:

<sup>3:21</sup> And I commanded Joshua at that time, ‘Your eyes have seen all that Yahweh your God has done to these two kings. So will Yahweh do to all the kingdoms into which you are crossing. <sup>22</sup> You shall not fear them, for it is Yahweh your God who fights for you.’

<sup>23</sup> “And I pleaded with Yahweh at that time, saying, <sup>24</sup> ‘O Lord Yahweh, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? <sup>25</sup> Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.’ <sup>26</sup> But Yahweh was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And Yahweh said to me, ‘Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. <sup>27</sup> Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan. <sup>28</sup> But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see.’ <sup>29</sup> So we remained in the valley opposite Beth-peor.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we do believe that your word  
is firmly fixed forever, with you, in the heavens.  
Your faithfulness endures to all generations,  
you have made this world and it stands as you will it to.  
Lord, as your people, help us to never forget your precepts,  
Because by them you have given us life.  
Lord, we are yours, save us,  
for we have sought your ways.  
Grant us life now through this your word.  
In Jesus’s name. Amen

[Based on Psalm 119:89, 90, 93, 94]

## **Introduction**

As most of you know, I have three young children at home. And so, every now and then, I hear the phrase “But that’s not fair.”

If you have kids, or you’ve spent much time with kids, or you’ve ever been a kid, then you probably know that this is a common phrase for children. Whether through a lack of comprehension or a lack of getting what they want – whether the problem is intellectual or the problem is moral – they can often hear the verdict of someone in authority, and their response is a distressed cry that the verdict they’ve just heard is not just.

“That’s not fair” they blurt out.

And I think, if we’re honest, even if we don’t want it to be true – even if we scold ourselves for even having the thought – still, for most of us, that is our response to our text this morning.

Before even thinking it through we want to blurt out: “But that’s not fair.”

And reflecting more on the details of the event described in our text often doesn’t immediately relieve us of that response.

Moses has been through so much. He has done so much good for God’s people. He has answered God’s call, he has led God’s people out of slavery, he has trusted the Lord to deliver them, he has received God’s word faithfully, he has led God’s people in the wilderness, he has dealt with rebellion after rebellion from the people, and he has interceded for them before God. Moses has done far more good than just about any of us here have done.

But God here says that he may not enter the promised land. And why not? What is his offense?

In Numbers 20, provoked by the incessant complaints of God’s people about the lack of water at Meribah, Moses, in providing water for them as God told him to, did it in a way that broke God’s commandment. And he broke God’s commandment in such a way that, God notes in Numbers 20 and Deuteronomy 32, Moses failed to trust in God, and failed to treat God as holy before the people. [Wright, 41-42]

And the result is that Moses cannot enter the land that has been promised to Israel – a punishment that Moses is deeply distressed about. He mentions it six times in the Book of Deuteronomy, he seems to have repeatedly prayed that this punishment would be lifted, and his plea here is one of passion and desperation. [Wright, 41]

Moses has done so much. And now, in light of this one sin, he is being denied entrance into the promised land that his heart has longed for for decades.

And we consider that, and we want to say: “But that’s not fair.”

Now, if we are believing Christians, then at the same time that one part of our heart may say “But that’s not fair,” another part of our heart may be quoting the words of Abraham, who said, speaking of the God of the Bible: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” And then we are left perplexed.

And even while we might be able to rationalize the justice of this passage, our hearts often protest. It doesn’t feel right.

Henri De Lubac, in his book explaining the hermeneutics of Origen of Alexandria highlighted that for Origen, elements in the Biblical text that strike us as problematic or contradictory are not there to be rushed past or brushed aside, but they are rather there to call us to stop, and consider the meaning of the text more closely. [De Lubac, 113]

And that is our goal for this morning. We want to stop, and reflect on this text specifically, and on the fate of Moses in general, in order to better grasp the deeper things of the Scriptures.

And as we do that, I think four things emerge. We see two false hopes that are rejected in our text, one great need that is revealed in our text, and one true hope that is reaffirmed in our text.

So: Two false hopes rejected, one great need revealed, and one true hope reaffirmed.

### **A First False Hope Rejected**

First, two false hopes rejected.

And as we consider these, the wrestling with this text that historic Jewish rabbis have done can be a helpful aid to us.

Jewish commentary and reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures – often referred to as Midrash – gives us an interesting window into this passage ... or maybe more accurately, an interesting conversation partner. We won’t always agree with them, but, both when we agree, and sometimes especially when we disagree, what we find in those historic commentators can be revealing – either about the text itself or about the errors of our own hearts.

In an interesting article, scholar Judah Goldin summarizes and interacts with these historic Jewish commentaries – this Midrash – from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD on the topic of our text this morning.

What then do we find there?

Well, a few different things.

First, there is a group of Midrash that reflects on this text and concludes that Moses, as he is presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, could not have deserved this punishment. And so they attempt to add to or adjust Moses’s story to make it make more sense to them.

Some argue, on the one hand, that since Moses did so much good, he must not have really died.

Instead, he must have simply been taken to heaven – like Enoch earlier on in the Old Testament. [Goldin, 220] So this view says, yes, Moses was good, and so he didn't actually receive a real punishment – he didn't die. He only appeared to die. In truth, he simply received his reward for his good life and his good works.

Of course the tricky part with that approach is that the Hebrew Scriptures seem to make it pretty clear that Moses did die.

And so, others have gone the opposite direction. They admit that Moses did die, and they conclude that he must have done a lot more to deserve it than we read of in Numbers 20. These works contain imagined dialogues in which God says that actually, Moses was much worse and much more sinful than he comes off in the Hebrew Scriptures. [Goldin, 220-221] And so, the tension is relieved, because, actually, Moses wasn't so good after all.

Still others, rather than making Moses look worse or making God's judgment look lighter, try to eliminate the element of judgment altogether. They offer instead an extra-biblical account in which Moses asks God to please allow him to die, rather than enter the promised land under Joshua's leadership. In the story that they tell, God has already handed leadership over to Joshua, Moses has the option to assist Joshua as Joshua leads, but that role is so distressing to Moses that he declares: "Better a hundred deaths than one experience of envy" and he begs God to let him die before the conquest. [Goldin, 221]

Now, here's what I think is interesting in all this. Each of these views feels the tension we feel: that Moses seemed to do so much good, and yet he was receiving this serious judgment, and they try to relieve the tension by eliminating one half of it: either Moses was a lot worse than we realize, or the judgment wasn't really a judgment.

Such explanations are attractive. But none of them fit with the text.

The text of Scripture tells us that Moses did much good. We read in Numbers 12:3 "Now the man Moses was very meek, more meek than all people who were on the face of the earth."

But it's not just summary statements like that that we get. Over and over we read of Moses's faithfulness. Over and over we read of him doing the right thing under great temptation or stress. If you had to rate all of humanity in terms of their moral goodness, it's hard to deny that Moses would be towards the top!

And so we cannot go along with any Midrashic texts that try to paint Moses as actually being below-average spiritually and morally.

Moses must have ranked towards the top layer of human goodness.

And then our text confronts us with the assertion that he still wasn't good enough.

He still didn't merit the promised land. He still deserved God's judgment.

Why?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us of two important facts when it comes to sin – when it comes to our disobedience towards God. The first is that some sins *are* more heinous in the sight of God than others. Some sins, for a variety of reasons, are worse than others. And that is an important thing for us to recognize. [WSC #83]

And we may look at Moses’s sin and then want to argue that he did not deserve such a judgment.

But then we need to turn to the second moral fact that the catechism points us to: that “every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.” [WSC #84]

“Every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.”

Why?

Well, God is just. And the just penalty due for any crime is based on the severity of the crime. And the severity of a crime is usually linked to the value of the thing that is wrongly taken, or damaged, or destroyed. We know this and it is reflected in our own human laws.

The penalty for stealing a candy bar is different than the penalty for stealing a car. In both cases, the crime is theft, but the severity of a just penalty is to be linked to the value in what was stolen – and a car is worth much more than a candy bar.

In the same way, the penalty for killing your neighbor’s chicken is different than the penalty for killing your neighbor’s child – because we recognize that a human being is of far more worth than a chicken.

That is a just principle: The proper penalty due for any crime is based on the value of the thing that was taken or damaged.

And what can be more valuable than the holiness and the glory of God?

God is the most valuable being that exists: he is infinite and eternal, perfect in his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. There is nothing of more value than God.

And Moses had dishonored God’s glory – he had, in some way, willfully refused to treat God as holy before Israel. He had sought to rob God of his holiness, to damage God’s glory, and nothing in the cosmos is more valuable than God. The value of the honor and glory of God is infinite. And so the moral debt Moses had incurred was infinite. And so is ours.

For we too have sinned against God’s glory and holiness. We have done it directly, when we have sinned against God by ignoring him, or by disregarding him, or by speaking ill of him, or by failing to worship and honor and obey him as we should. We have sinned against God’s glory and holiness directly.

We have also sinned against God’s glory and holiness indirectly, whenever we have sinned against his creatures. Human beings, the Bible tells us, are made in the image of God – and so any sin against a human being, is a desecration of the image of God that they bear. Every time you have sinned against another person, in thought or word or deed – any time you have sinned

against your own being in thought or word or deed – you have desecrated the image of God – an image of infinite value. And so, you have incurred an infinite moral debt.

We have all sinned against the glory and the holiness of God. And so Nobody deserved to go into the promised land. Moses's death outside that land is a witness to that truth [Wright, 42]

We like to focus on the good we have done. And Moses too did a lot of good. But none of it was enough to pay off the moral debt he had incurred by sinning against the glory of God even once.

And we have done it far more than once. Again and again, directly, and indirectly, we have sought to steal, or to damage, or to destroy the glory and honor and holiness of God. And we cannot pay off the moral debt that we have incurred.

And so, in the death of Moses, the first false hope that is rejected is the false hope of trusting in our own goodness.

### **A Second False Hope Rejected**

But there is a second false hope revealed in Moses's death as well. And that is the false hope that can be placed in another human being.

Other Midrash – other historic Jewish commentary – points out that there was a danger in Moses's role – a danger that he could be idolized. A danger that he could be treated as divine. And so Moses needed to die, to remind Israel that he was just a man. [Goldin, 223-224]

In other words, Moses needed to die, in order to remind Israel of his limitations, and that he could not be the one to truly save them.

And we may need such reminders as well. For we too can be prone to believing that if we just find the right human to hold onto, then we will be saved.

Where do you see that pattern in your own life?

Maybe for you it is a worldly leader – someone you think can fix all your problems. Someone you can trust to set the world right, finally – to restore it to how it was meant to be.

Or maybe for you it is a human spiritual teacher. Someone – whether living or dead – that you can look to for all the answers – not just for wisdom or advice, but for ultimate answers.

Or maybe for you it is not an individual, but a community. You are looking for a group that has it all figured out. In a broken world, where everyone seems so flawed, you are hoping to find that community that has it together – that has mastered how to live out true love for one another, and true wisdom towards life or towards God. Maybe you've gone through a few communities that you *thought* were that ... but that in the end fell short. And so your search continues. You want to find a community in which you can place your ultimate trust, and then you want to withdraw with them from the rest of the world, and trust them for your salvation.

Or maybe it's less overtly spiritual for you. Maybe it's more emotional. In his important work titled *The Denial of Death*, Earnest Becker points out that many in the modern world, when facing such deep needs, turn to what he calls the "romantic solution." [160]

This is the solution that says: "Whatever may be wrong with me, or whatever may be wrong with the world ... if only I can have that one person ... if only I can have him ... or her ... if only I can have true love ... *then* I'll be ok."

In the modern world, Becker notes, people openly seek to find in a romantic partner what they used to seek to find in God: ultimate fulfillment, spiritual satisfaction, peace, and – in some sense – even eternal security. Listen to almost any popular love song and the hopes and dreams the singer places on a beloved seem to be more appropriate for a deity than a mere mortal. [160-161]

But it is still about a mere mortal. And as Moses reminds us, mere mortals die.

And their shortcomings are often quite apparent well before that. As Becker puts it: "No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood." [166]

"After all," Becker writes, "what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption – nothing less. We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know that our creation has not been in vain. We turn to the love partner [...] for perfect validation; we expect them to 'make us good' through love. Needless to say, human partners can't do this." [167]

And in the end, any attempt to get this from another human being destroys that other person. Becker writes: "If your partner is your 'All', then any shortcoming in him becomes a major threat to *you*. / If a woman loses her beauty, or shows that she doesn't have the strength or dependability that [you] once thought she did, or loses her intellectual sharpness, or falls short of [your] peculiar needs in any of a thousand ways, then all the investment [you] have made in her is undermined. The shadow of imperfection falls over [your life]." [166-167]

Whether in the form of a religious leader, or in the form of a romantic partner, another human being cannot save us – they cannot bear the weight of our souls. And the death of Moses reminds us of that.

### **One Great Need Revealed**

That's a fairly negative message so far. But it actually gets a bit worse. Because another Midrashic text points us to an even greater tragedy of the loss of Moses, by drawing our attention to the need it reveals, but leaves unfulfilled.

To see this, we need to consider Israel. Because Moses has repeatedly acted as a mediator between God and Israel, and in that role, he has repeatedly spared Israel from utter destruction. And when Moses dies, he will no longer be there to fill that role. [Goldin, 224-225]

In Exodus 32, after God has brought Israel out of Egypt – after he has saved them from slavery

and defeated their oppressors – Israel rebels against God by building an idol, and worshiping it. And God’s justice comes to bear. And God declares that he is going to judge Israel, and destroy them for their rebellion and unfaithfulness, and then start again with Moses and make a new nation – a new people – from Moses’s descendants alone.

And Moses intercedes for Israel. He pleads with God on behalf of Israel. He calls on God to spare and to forgive Israel, both for God’s own glory, and also out of faithfulness to the gracious covenant that God made with their forefather Abraham. And God receives Moses’s plea, and he spares Israel.

And then in Numbers 14, after God has spoken to Israel from Mt. Sinai, and brought Israel to the promised land, and promised to give them victory there just as he did in Egypt, again, the people rebel. They refuse to enter the land. They refuse to trust God. And again, God’s justice comes to bear. And again God declares that as just judgment, he will strike Israel with pestilence and he will disinherit them, and he will make a nation from Moses instead.

And once again Moses intercedes for Israel. He calls on God’s promise to be a God who forgives iniquity and transgression, and he calls on God to forgive again the sins of Israel and to neither destroy nor disinherit them. And again, God receives Moses’s prayer, and he pardons Israel, and they remain his people.

It happens again in the first half of Numbers 16, and once again Moses intercedes, and God spares Israel. And then it happens yet again in the second half of Numbers 16.

Over and over, Moses has served as the mediator between God and God’s people, pleading for them when they deserve God’s just judgment. And in that way, he has been a reminder that that is what God’s people need. God’s people remain deeply sinful in this life. Their own merits cannot save them. And so they need a mediator – they need someone who is a friend of God, who can make intercession for them, who can atone for them when they fail, so that they do not receive the just sentence from God that they deserve. And again and again, Moses has filled that role in the early books of the Bible.

But now Moses is going to die.

And we need to recognize that this is not just a tragedy for Moses. This is also a tragedy for God’s people. They need a mediator to secure God’s pardon for them when they deserve God’s judgment.

But now Moses is going to die.

And so, Moses’s death reveals a great need. A need that has never gone away. God’s people need a mediator – one who will intercede, one who will atone for them. And we have that need as well.

### **One True Hope Reaffirmed**

And the truth is that Moses also had that need. He may have filled in in that role for Israel, but

not even he could bear the weight of it – it was too much. And he too was guilty before God.

In Moses's story we are reminded of our false hopes and our great need.

And if Moses's story ended there, we would be left without much to hold onto. We would be easily tempted to despair.

But Moses's story, it turns out, does not end there.

Moses will die at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. But interestingly, we will see him again in the Scriptures.

He will show up again, in person, over a thousand years later, in the gospels. He will show up at the transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

Luke records it like this – in Luke 9 we read that one day Jesus:

took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses, and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men [that is, as Moses and Elijah] were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

Moses appeared in glory, we read in verse thirty-one. But how? How could Moses appear in glory when he was unworthy – when he fell short and did not deserve it? Yet there he is in Luke's gospel, glorified before God.

It is true that the earthly pattern of Moses's life, as we have read of it this morning, pointed to Moses's unworthiness. That is true, and that is a fact we must take to heart. Moses could not, on his own, merit even the earthly promised land, let alone a heavenly one.

But in the transfiguration of Jesus we are reminded that the ultimate pattern of Moses's life – the eternal pattern of his life – pointed to the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we see that in at least two aspects of the account that Luke gives us of the transfiguration.

The first is what Moses is talking about with Jesus and Elijah. Luke writes in verse thirty-one, that they were speaking of Jesus's "departure" – by which they meant the death that lay ahead of him, on the cross, in Jerusalem, followed by his resurrection from the dead, and then his bodily ascension into heaven.