

The View from Mt. Pisgah, Deuteronomy 34:1-8

Proposition: We have come to Mt. Pisgah. Moses saw the promised land from here, and we will too.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, today we dedicate this building to the worship of God Almighty through His Son. Our church has gathered for worship every Sunday for fifteen years now. We are coming out of our childhood and maturing toward adulthood as a congregation. We have prayed for the past three years for a larger meeting space that would allow all of us to continue to gather together and worship God. And God has heard that prayer. This building has actually been here since 1963, and it has been available for rent the whole time we were looking for a place to worship. But God has directed us here now, in His own excellent good time. Today, as part of dedicating this building to the worship of God, I want us to focus on the name of this cemetery. It is called Mt. Pisgah.

Now, ideally, I would want all of you to recognize this name. I would go so far as to say that when our city fathers named this cemetery at its establishment in the early 1890s, every resident of Campbell County would have known the reference and thought it fitting. Today, I fear that very few people in Gillette know where the name of our cemetery comes from. It comes, of course, from the text that we have just read describing the death of Moses. This place is called Mt. Pisgah because though it is outside the promised land, you can see the promised land from here. In other words, as our Biblically-literate forefathers interpreted it, the cemetery is the last stop before heaven. This is a high place from which we the living can look out and see our heavenly home on the horizon. The cemetery director was telling me that from one of the district's other properties, you can look out and see the Big Horn mountains on a clear day.

That's cool. I have nothing against the Big Horns. But I'd a thousand times rather be on Pisgah and see the promised land, which is heaven.

God has led us to Pisgah, just as He led Moses to Pisgah over 3,000 years ago. This is God's chosen site for our church. He has put roadblocks in the way of countless other properties; if you want a rundown, you can ask one of the deacons. But He cleared the way for us to be here. We need to embrace this setting. God wants us on Mt Pisgah. Moses saw the promised land from here, and we will too.

I. Moses' Last Trip: To Mt. Pisgah, v. 1a

The whole book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell discourse. After he led Israel out of Egypt, after he mediated the giving of the law, after he wrote the five books that are the foundation of our knowledge of God, God spoke to him and told him to go climb Mt Pisgah. His last trip was a hike in the mountains. Touching, right? But the reason he went on this hike in the mountains was not to see wild and sublime mountain scenery. He was not a nature romantic, as you may have noticed from reading his books. He never celebrates the countryside as such, never comments on the stark beauty of Sinai or the green gladness of Goshen. He was a traveler, a man who spent 80 years trekking through the wilderness. But his books are full not of earth, but of heaven — not of scenery, but of sanctity.

The reason Moses chose this particular mountain is that God hand-picked it for him. I need hardly point out the parallels to our own situation. We are here because God has picked this mountain for us to dwell in. We will settle down here for a while. Anyway, listen to God's command:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go up to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel. And when you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was; for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.) (Num 27:12-14 NAS)

So already, in the book of Numbers, God tells Moses what his fate is going to be. He is going to take a last hike in the mountains, a final trip to the mountaintop. The LORD adds explicitly at the end of Deuteronomy why Moses is not allowed to enter the land.

Go up to this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and look at the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the sons of Israel for a possession. Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with Me in the midst of the sons of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not treat Me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel. For you shall see the land at a distance, but you shall not go there, into the land which I am giving the sons of Israel." (Deu 32:49-33:1 NAS)

Aaron went up Mt Hor and died there. Moses is going to go up Mt Pisgah, in the Nebo Range in the territory of Abarim, and there he is going to die as well. All of this is because God told him

to speak to the rock to get water, but Moses chose to strike the rock instead. He whacked the rock with the rod of Aaron that had been the sign of Aaron's holiness, and water poured out.

Moses was not allowed to go into the promised land himself. He represents the law, and the law cannot take you to heaven. I would also comment that the leader has to be like his people. It was Moses' fate to lead an entire generation that was going to die in the wilderness, outside the promised land — and thus, he too had to experience this consequence of dying in the wilderness outside the promised land.

This does not mean that Moses failed to go to heaven, or anything like that. He was excluded not from the reality of the promised land, but only from the type of the promised land.

II. Moses' Last Glimpse: The Promised Land, vv. 1b-3

But though he did not get to enter the land, he got to see it. As he stood on the mountaintop, the LORD personally descended to him and showed him the land.

Now, as cool as the promised land was, it was a type and shadow of the heavenly reality. God's dwelling place in the tabernacle and temple was only a faint shadow of His real dwelling place in heaven. The promised land was like heaven, but it was not heaven. My point is that standing with God and having Him point out the promised land to you is a really good consolation prize. The whole point of dwelling in the land is that you got to live with God. He would be your neighbor. But we all know that just because someone is your neighbor doesn't mean that you frequently talk to them. You may go years without saying a word to your neighbor. Moses, though, got to speak with God face to face — including here on Pisgah.

God had him look first to the north, the land of Gilead all the way up to Dan. This is the territory that would later be called Galilee, the place with the Son of God would grow up. Then the LORD pointed to the west, out toward the Mediterranean Sea. Moses looked that way, and he saw the territories that would belong to the three great tribes of Northern Israel, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Naphtali. This is the beautiful, green farming area of Israel. And then the Lord pointed to the southwest, toward Jerusalem and the Negev Desert south of it. And then Moses, following the Lord's pointing, looked down and saw Jericho, the Dead Sea, and Zoar at the Sea's southern tip. Moses never set foot in the promised land because of his sin that mirrored the sin of his people. But he got to see it with God Himself.

III. The Unbreakable Word of the LORD, v. 4

Of course, there was a valuable spiritual lesson for Moses here. Moses served as a sort of king and a sort of priest, but his overwhelmingly dominant role was the role of the prophet. It was his job to speak the word of the LORD, and the repeated "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying," that runs all through the Pentateuch is the glorious fruit of the prophetic office of the son of Amram. Of course, the problem with being a prophet is that you can start to think that you control the word of the LORD. You can start to imagine that because you open your mouth and God's words come out, they are your words and under your control. God has had to smack His prophets upside the head in some pretty brutal ways to remind them that they are the servants of the word, not its masters, and that anyone who wields the word of God can die by the word of God. Getting onto the wrong side of the untameable word of the LORD is one of the most dangerous

occupational hazards of the prophet, and Moses was no exception. By the way, I am not an exception here either. The word of the Lord has struck down many a preacher who got too big for his britches. These verses cite the word of the Lord and tell us that it prevailed over against Moses, the greatest prophet of the old covenant, wielder of an unmatched pen to write masterpieces like the book of Genesis, literary genius and founder of a people. But at the end, it was God's word that prevailed, not the word or heart of Moses. Listen to how he describes it to his people in the early part of Deuteronomy:

I also pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, 'O Lord God, Thou hast begun to show Thy servant Thy greatness and Thy strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Thine? Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me; and the LORD said to me, 'Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. (Deu 3:23-27 NAS)

The man who interceded for the people to be spared after the Golden Calf incident, the man who successfully lobbied God for a sight of God's back — this man's might in prayer was not enough to get the LORD to relent. God, you can do anything! That's what Moses pleaded. He cited the strong hand of God, the strong hand that could bring the people into the land, the greatness it would be for God to overlook Moses' sin and let him enter the land. But no. God was angry because Moses had dishonored Him in front of the people, and God told him to shut it. You will look at it, but you will never see it.

A. Promised Land, v. 4a

The narrative in Deut 34 reminds us that God had promised this land to His people over five hundred years before, when He spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was promised to their seed.

B. Forbidden Land, v. 4b

Moses could say "I am part of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; can't I please just put my toe into Canaan?" But to Moses, it was a forbidden land. "You shall not go over there." It's not an option, Moses. God will be treated as holy, and no matter your status among the people of God, if you don't treat Him as holy and honor Him in front of everyone, you will taste the consequences. For Moses, the consequences were that he was not allowed to go across the river and into the land.

This is a reminder that the presence of God is not a given. No one can sin with impunity, can say "I'm so high in God's favor that this sin will not have consequences for me." If you think that, look out. It will have consequences for you, consequences you're not going to like. God will only allow those who are holy to enter the promised land. The only one fit to climb the hill of LORD has to have clean hands and a pure heart. Moses had soiled his hands by disbelieving God, by striking the rock, by yelling at the congregation in rage. Though his eternal future was secure, he faced earthly consequences for what he did.

C. Death outside the Land, v. 5

That consequence was death outside the land. He did not get to see Jerusalem at sunrise. He did not get to dip his toe into the Jordan river. He did not get to lie down and kiss the ground and say “At last! I get to see the promises of God to my forefathers fulfilled.” Instead, he walked into a tomb there on Mt Pisgah, laid down, and died. He didn’t get to see what God had said about a land for His people coming true. He had to miss it.

Think of Simeon and Anna, standing in the temple, waiting for the consolation of Israel. But imagine that because of their sin, God had had them die two days before Mary & Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. It’s like dying on December 23. You just missed the holiday; you don’t get the special time where we celebrate how God keeps his promises.

In other words, brothers and sisters, Pisgah is a warning to us as well as a blessing to us. We are supremely grateful to the LORD for leading us here. We are thrilled with His kind and generous providence. But we also need to recognize that Pisgah says “Watch out. Your sin can bite you hard. Your sin can create earthly consequences that exclude you from getting to see the mighty work of God. If you dishonor God, especially if you dishonor God publicly from a position of leadership like Moses did, you can expect to be chastened for that. You can expect to just miss the fulfillment of a promise. You can expect to not be there when God acts to keep His word of blessing.”

I don’t know what you might miss or I might miss if we dishonor the Almighty like Moses did. But I know I don’t want to miss it, and neither do you. We recognize that we will likely die on earth, that we probably won’t get to go directly to Heaven without death. In that sense, we are all going to die outside the land. But let Moses’ death bother you just a little. His eye was not dim nor his natural force abated. There is no health reason why he couldn’t have been there when the walls of Jericho fell down and Israel knew that the Promised Land was theirs. The reason he was excluded was a spiritual reason, the LORD’s chastening in the life of his servant.

Maybe the most obvious application here is to come to church. This is the arena where God is going to fulfill many of His greatest promises about changing hearts and transforming lives. If you don’t come to church to worship the Lord, you won’t get to see Him working in the lives of your fellow saints — or in your own life, for that matter. There are people who have sweated and prayed and given for the sake of a new building who are not here today to see this building. Now, Lord-willing many of them will get to see it over the next few weeks. But as we stand on the soil of Pisgah, don’t forget its warning to you.

IV. A Prophet without a Tomb, v. 6

Pisgah gives a second warning, too. The Lord buried Moses in an undisclosed location. If you go down to the front office here, you will see a binder that lists the names and burial locations of everyone in the eight cemeteries managed by our cemetery district. But “Moses ben Amram” won’t be on that list. His tomb is unknown to this day. Why did God bury this great prophet in an undisclosed location? The obvious answer is to prevent people from coming and worshipping at his tomb — to prevent a local shrine and place of pilgrimage emerging. Human beings love to do

that — to build the tombs of the prophets. Jesus denounces that as generally being an act of hypocrisy indulged in by the people who would have killed the prophet but, now that he's safely dead, are more than happy to commemorate his sainted memory and use it to denounce anyone who brings the same message that the prophet brought. The best example, of course, is that the scribes as Pharisees as the custodians of Moses' memory fought with and eventually killed Jesus for teaching the same gospel Moses taught.

Moses has no tomb so that we don't get wrapped up in a physical spot, but instead commemorate him the right way: by reading Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, believing them in our hearts and applying them to our lives. The Pentateuch is the only monument that Moses the man of God needs. It is much the same as what Milton, our second greatest English poet, said of our greatest nearly 400 years ago:

WHAT needs my Shakespear for his honour'd Bones,
The labour of an age in piled Stones,
Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
Under a Star-ypointing Pyramid?
Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
What need'st thou such weak witnes of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
For whilst to th'shame of slow-endeavouring art,
Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart 10
Hath from the Leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
Those Delphick lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving,
Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

Moses needs no star-ypointing pyramid. He left Egypt because he had no wish to be buried in the sort of monumental tomb that will last ten thousand years (the pyramids are already halfway there, you know). He has something far better, a live-long Monument, the undying and unfailling Word of God that he was privileged to write not for an age, but for all time. Genesis will live on when Hamlet is forgotten.

So don't build a tomb and worship the departed. We are not R.C. Sproul memorial presbyterian church; we have no bust of our founder, Clint Beaver, sitting on a pedestal by the piano for all of us to look at each week. We are Mt Pisgah Pres now, and that means that we see the promised land week by week — not with the eye of flesh, as Moses did, but with the eye of faith that can pierce the boundary of the known universe, looking through the veil of darkness that covers the night sky and see the light of God's glory beyond.

V. Application

So what do we do with this text? Obviously, the literal sense is good to know. It is literally true that about 3400 years ago Moses climbed up a ridge in today's Jordan and looked out over Canaan before he died. But what spiritual value can we glean from this literal sense? Obviously, we need to hear the warning of Pisgah: Don't dishonor the LORD or you may miss out on the fulfillment of His great and precious promises. You may experience some earthly consequences for your sin. But on the positive side, too, we can make five observations.

A. The LORD has brought us to Mt. Pisgah, but it isn't ours

The first of them is this: The LORD has brought us to Mt Pisgah. This cemetery building is His gift to His church. We looked, but we didn't find it until He was ready for us to find it. He has the building we need, the finances we need, and everything else we need. It's all in His hands. He is reminding us of that by giving us this building to use, but withholding the title deed from us. This is a rented property, not a property we own. This building belongs to the Campbell County Cemetery District, and we use it at their good pleasure. Mt Pisgah is not in the promised land. God did not give the mountain to Moses. Moses has nothing more than a cemetery plot there. Many of you, I trust, own plots up the hill above us. That's a good idea. But Moses did not get buried on land that he owned. He was buried on borrowed land.

B. We can see the Promised Land, but it belongs to Christ

Further, let us notice that from here on Mt Pisgah, we can see the promised land. When we gather for the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, we can see heaven. When we love one another by worshipping together, we can see heaven. The land is not ours yet; heaven is still future. But it is your Lord's. Jesus is preparing a place for us in His Father's house. And so we need to look forward to the promised land. We need to look at the promised land. You may still be alive when the Lord returns. We simply don't know — but we do know that like Moses, we on Pisgah can get a glimpse of what's to come.

C. In Him we will inherit the earth, but likely after we die

In fact, the Promised Land too is bigger than we thought. The seed of Abraham will inherit not just Canaan, but the whole earth. Paul tells us in Rom 4 that God promised Abraham that he would be heir of the world. Canaan was never the whole goal, or the whole promise. Right now, this building is not ours. But in heaven, the whole earth will be ours. The meek will inherit the earth. If you are privileged to still be alive when the Lord returns, then you will not need to die first. But likely, you and I will have to go through death — but on the other side of death, the world will be ours. It will belong to Moses, too, when the Lord returns. Pisgah is a sign that the promised land has been postponed. You may miss out on the sign, but you won't miss out on the thing signified.

D. It is appropriate to bury the dead, but not to worship them

I would also observe that there is an unmarked tomb on Pisgah. God did not leave Moses' body out to rot, but decently buried it there. In fact, Jude tells us something tantalizing about the Archangel Michael being sent by God to get Moses' body because Satan was trying to take it. Anyway, God buries the dead and so should we. This cemetery is a place of honor and memory,

and we need to keep it that way. Children, some of you have spoken to me about playing on the tombstones. Under no circumstances should any member of this church, young or old, ever be caught dead playing leapfrog or hopscotch on the tombstones.

There are errors in both directions here. You can venerate the dead too highly, or fail to venerate them highly enough. God hid Moses' burial site to prevent superstitious people from venerating it too highly. But we are likely to have the opposite problem. The cemetery is a place to be solemn, to remember our own mortality, to honor the dead of Campbell County who lie here waiting for the day of resurrection. They are here on Pisgah because it provides a good view of the promised land. We are next door to heaven when we are in a graveyard. That means we need to conduct ourselves with honor and respect. There is a large play area with no graves out here behind me and to my right. Children, that is yours to run and play and kick soccer balls in. But up the hill are the graves, and they are places of honor and memory. They are not toys and are not to be treated as toys.

So don't err in excess by worshiping the dead. Don't err in defect, by dishonoring the dead. Hold to the right course, as shown to us by God Himself, who buried Moses but hid his tomb.

E. We worship here, among the tombs, because one tomb is already empty
Finally, brothers and sisters, let me make the most important point of all about graveyards: we worship here, among the full tombs, because one tomb is already empty. The stone was rolled away on the third day, and the one who died for us rose again and walked out, leaving the graveclothes there. His tomb is empty; He has risen from the dead! That's why we worship Him. We remember His agony and bitter passion. We remember and proclaim His death. There is no better setting for a church than a graveyard, because it looks backwards to the death of Adam and of all his seed — and forwards to the resurrection of all of the seed of Jesus Christ. He is alive, and that is why we do not fear death. As I understand it, in ancient cities graveyards were on the edge of town. Here, in our once-Christian city, the graveyard is in the heart of downtown. Why? Because we do not fear death. Jesus is alive, and those in Him will live too.

This is Pisgah, and from here, we can see heaven. The redeemed of the LORD will walk there, as they sleep here.

Brothers and sisters, join me here each week on Mt Pisgah. From here, the LORD will show us heaven, where we will dwell in His house forever. I can't wait. Amen.