

## **Bible Study #13 Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

This week we reach the end of the story of Moses, although not the end of the narrative describing the journey of the Israelites to the promised land which will continue next week in a reading from the book of Joshua. Having spent many weeks with Moses now, the reading of the story of his death seems particularly poignant, and a sense of mercy and peace and gentleness pervades the passage. If we just take a cursory look at the preceding chapters we can see that Moses has continued to be faithful to God and tireless in his service to God and the people of Israel. At the beginning of Deuteronomy 31 Moses tells the people that he's reached the age of 120 and God has told him that he won't enter the land so he commissions Joshua to take over from him in leadership. This commissioning is repeated by God later in the same chapter. Moses finishes writing down the law, and then God gives Moses a song to recite to the people. This song takes up most of chapter 32! Moses emphasises to the people the importance of observing the law and being obedient to God - in 32:47 he says, "This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life!" And then from verse 48 onwards God invites Moses to come up Mount Nebo where he will be shown the promised land before he dies. The whole of chapter 33 is a long blessing that Moses bestows on Israel before he leaves them. So before we've even got to our reading today we are perhaps struck by the serenity and peace of Moses' final days. God deals gently with Moses and extends mercy to all the people. And Moses accepts his mortality in such a way that reveals to us the peace that pervades his heart.

We can't help but be reminded that in one aspect this passage is a statement of judgement. If we go back to the incident at Meribah in Exodus 17:1-7 (and Numbers 20:1-13) we see that because of Moses' lack of trust in God he would not be allowed to enter the land. And God reminds Moses of this in verse 4 of this passage: "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." But this reminder from Yahweh comes gently, it seems rather muted, almost as if the punishment has been forgotten. The emphasis seems to be rather on the mortality of Moses, who, despite his great energy and strength which we can read about in verse 7, will die and enable a new leader to emerge. Moses seems to accept this readily and with grace.

But before God allows Moses to die there is a treat in store. From the top of Mount Nebo Moses is able to look down into the land of promise - what will be the culmination of a 40 year journey. In verses 1-3 we're given some details about the areas in which the different tribes will settle. We don't know how Moses feels about what he sees in front of him. If he resents not being able to take those final steps he doesn't show it, so perhaps he simply feels pleasure and relief that for the people the end is in sight. His silence seems to suggest peaceful acceptance rather than seething anger! And Yahweh is the mood for mercy, not anger. In verse 4 God reminds Moses that God has kept the promise that was made so long ago.

Leadership now moves to Joshua, and we're told that the same Spirit of wisdom that was in Moses has passed to this new leader. These reminders of Moses are significant, showing that Joshua is indeed God's chosen leader at this time, and that Moses' example still lives on. The final two verses of this chapter remind us of the wonders Moses performed on God's behalf - things that were amazing and terrifying. And these verse also give Moses the credit he deserves - he was an unequalled leader in the history of Israel, and God knew him "face to face".

In the last few weeks we've seen many ways in which God has called Moses to convey God's message to Israel. We've also seen Moses respond in a number of ways - with fear and self-doubt, with bravery and challenge. But apart from on one occasion, Moses has acted with great trust and

has faithfully carried out all that God has asked of him. Even the exception at Meribah reads more like the kind of normal impatience we all experience rather than wilful and sinful disobedience. But despite all of the great things Moses did in obedience to God, or maybe because he would come to be seen as an enduring model figure, he pays a price. Perhaps this is to avoid Moses becoming the object of worship himself - after all, the people had seen Moses and knew him, and could easily have transferred their devotion to him posthumously, and indirectly turned away from God. They could have seen Moses as the man God let get away with anything! They could have not taken on board the consequences of their own actions (and it was their own moaning and demanding that led to Moses' frustration and apparent lack of trust in God in the first place!)

As we've seen in the last couple of weeks, wherever God's justice clashes with God's mercy, mercy always wins, and it seems that we have another example of it here. The sense of holiness and veneration that we get from this passage makes us forget that Moses, like all of us, was a sinner. The people are awed by all that Moses had done, and although they fulfilled the period of mourning that was ritually required, we do get the impression that their tears for Moses are heartfelt.

There's a strong sense of pragmatism about this passage too though. The people need to move forward. They've wandered long enough. It sounds as though they observe the 30 day mourning period but then they're ready to face the challenges that will be coming under their new leader Joshua. Joshua may have been commissioned by Moses, but he wasn't Moses, and the things that happen later on will show that Joshua faces similar demands to Moses and his responses are always bold and faithful. But here, Moses has gone and now is the time for looking forwards. There can be no more harking back to all that they left behind in Egypt. The promised land is just ahead, and Joshua will be the one to lead the people into it.

### **For further reflection:**

Read through the passage again slowly, and take note of any words or phrases that come to mind. Take notice of how the passage makes you feel and of any emotions that it evokes in you.

Have you ever experienced the death of a leader? What do you notice about the ways in which these things are marked? How does this compare to the story of the death of Moses?

How easy do you find it to respond to the challenge to move on? How easy do you find it to adapt to new leadership - perhaps in a church context, or nationally, or in some other group or institution that you're part of? When has the transfer of power gone well, and what enables this transition to take place smoothly and positively? What hinders the transition?

How do you respond to the way in which God blesses Moses with this final vision before he dies? Can you think of any parallels?

Imagine yourself in the same position as Moses. What would you like God to show you before your mortal life comes to an end?

How do you respond to the notion of dying well, or to the idea of legacy? If verses 10-12 were written about you, what would you want them to say?

Offer to God your hopes in life, and ask for God's blessing and guidance in all that lies ahead.