

# OpenTheo

## June 2nd: Deuteronomy 34 & Luke 18:1-30

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The death of Moses. The surprising ways the kingdom is received.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

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, 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 Zoar. 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. 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. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses. And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Deuteronomy chapter 34 is the end of the book of Deuteronomy, but also the end of the Pentateuch. It tells of the end of Moses' life and his death and burial. Moses is brought up onto the mountain where he can see the land before him.

He's shown the land like Abraham is shown the land in Genesis chapter 13 verses 14 to 15. The Lord said to Abraham after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are northward and southward and eastward and westward for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. Moses is described as the servant of the Lord.

He's the great servant of the Lord, faithful in all the Lord's house. He doesn't enter the land though in part because he is just a servant with a particular task, one who proved unfaithful at a key moment. He is not ultimately the hero, the one who accomplishes the exodus.

Rather the Lord is the one who does this. The great servant dies before the great work is completed, because it doesn't ultimately depend upon him and his strength, leadership and charisma. It is the work of the Lord.

His eyes are undimmed and his vigor unabated. He retains his vision and he retains his energy and the two things go together. Moses' energy arises in no small measure from his sense of calling, not just physical vision but the spiritual vision of what God has put before Israel and the need to reach out and grasp it.

After Moses dies the people mourn for him for 30 days much as they did for Aaron in Numbers 20 verse 29. Joshua takes over at this point. He has the spirit of wisdom as Moses laid his hands on him.

Joshua was like a son in relation to Moses. He had been Moses' close personal assistant for almost 40 years from his own youth. When Moses and the Israelites were at Sinai, Joshua accompanied him up the mountain as his assistant.

He is described as his assistant from his youth in Numbers chapter 11 verse 28. Numbers chapter 13 verse 16 tells us that Joshua's original name was Hoshea. And that

Moses had renamed him Joshua.

Moses then plays a role relative to Joshua that's similar to that of a father to a son. In Numbers chapter 27 verses 18 to 23, Joshua had been invested with some of Moses' own authority. Moses previously begged the Lord to let him enter into the land in chapter 3 verses 23 to 29.

And he was told that he would not enter but rather that he would view the land from Pisgah as an alternative to entering. And I pleaded with the Lord at that time saying, O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servants 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 yourself? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country in Lebanon.

But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, Enough from you, do not speak to me of this matter again. 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, 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. So we remained in the valley opposite Beth Peor.

Why did Moses plead at this particular time? Had something happened that prompted him to do so? Well, earlier this chapter, Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had just entered into possession of their territory in the Transjordan. The character of these tribes is interesting. They seem to be seen as both within and without the land.

The promised land is presented as located on the far side of the Jordan, whereas much of Israel, these two and a half tribes, lived in the Transjordan. In Numbers chapter 32, Moses was initially angry with the tribes of Reuben and Gad because rather than join the other tribes in going over and taking possession of land on the far side of the Jordan, their request for land in the Transjordan suggests that they're shrinking back from entering into the promise and discouraging their brothers from doing so. However, that is not their purpose as it transpires and they are prepared to fight with their brothers to win the promised land and then to return to their own territory later.

Ammi Silver suggests that there is a connection between the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites and Moses' request to be allowed to enter the land. The Reubenites and the Gadites were part of the nation but not within the land proper. If it is possible for tribes to remain outside of the land and yet still be part of the nation, why can't Moses, the great leader of the people, himself enter in? However, the destiny of Reuben and Gad being part of the nation yet settled just outside of the land is in some way a blessing that the Lord gives to Moses too.

He ends up buried in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peel, the same valley that's mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 3 verse 29. He is buried outside the land but within a territory of his people. Let's take a small step back at this point.

Why end the book of Deuteronomy with the story of the death of Moses and focusing upon his uniqueness? He doesn't even enter into the land. Why have the final verse about Moses rather than about Joshua who's just been commissioned and will lead them into the land? Moses' death is foretold in chapter 32 verses 48 to 52. That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am 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 Zin, 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. These verses introducing the coming death of Moses hang over everything that follows.

It's in this context that Moses delivers his blessing of the people of Israel, of each of the tribes, and then in the final chapter we see coming to pass what is foretold in those verses. Emmanuel Shalev observes the expression that very day in verse 48 of chapter 32, which begins the statement about Moses' forthcoming death. It is not the most common expression, but almost every single time it occurs, it occurs at a critical juncture.

When Noah enters into the ark, when Abraham gets circumcised, when Israel leaves Egypt, when Israel eats the fruit of the land for the first time on the day after the Passover in the book of Joshua. Each of these occasions represent a transition from one form of life to another. It's stepping over a threshold into something new.

Something similar seems to be taking place here. Moses' death is a transition from one state to another, not just for Moses himself, but for the entire people of Israel. In Numbers chapter 19 and 20, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron are presented in terms of the red heifer, a ritual that allows for those who have been held outside of the camp to enter in.

And for Israel, that has been held outside of the promised land, to finally find admission. Moses' death, along with Aaron and Miriam's, is also a death that is required before Israel can enter into the land. As Moses dies, Israel can move on.

Moses was the great intermediary. His death represents the end of the period of Israel's infancy. He brought the law to the people.

Israel does not need a hero to ascend to heaven to bring God's word down to them. It does not need some great adventurer to cross fathomless oceans. With the gift of the law, the word is now on their mouths and in their hearts.

And at this point, Moses is at risk of being in the way. There are points when an intermediary can bring two people together by standing between them. But there are other points when an intermediary stands in the way, obstructing the way between two parties.

Israel had formerly been tempted to treat Moses as if a god, a lesser god under the greater god of the Lord. The removal of Moses as the intermediary at this point enables Israel to rise into a more mature, adult relationship with the Lord as they enter into the promised land. Our passage declares that no other prophet like Moses has arisen in the land.

This is in part in praise of his uniqueness. But it's also a declaration that Moses' purpose has been fulfilled. It does not need to be repeated in the same way.

To have another intermediary like Moses would be a step backwards. Moses is as a shoe that Israel has outgrown. A shoe that once enabled us to run can, after our feet have grown, leave us hobbling rather than sprinting.

The time for Moses and his sort of leadership is passing. And in his place, Joshua must bring something rather different. The site of Moses' final resting place is also unknown.

As a servant, he had served his purpose. However, if his resting place were known, it could become a site of pilgrimage. A sort of cult of Moses could arise.

The removal of Moses at this point then, and in the way that he is removed, prevents the servant from obstructing his master. The book ends without the entry. Moses is on the tantalising brink of the promised land.

His nose is, as it were, pressed up against the glass looking in. And the reader is left at this point too. The land is right before us.

But it appears not as a secure possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge. At the end of Genesis, which is very similar to this, ending with blessings by Jacob and then the death of Jacob and Joseph, the land is seen as a promise there too. It's presented in terms of promise in the deposit of Jacob's body in the land, as an anticipation of Israel being brought back to the land.

And in Joseph's statement concerning his bones being taken up with Israel and brought into the land. The book ends looking towards the horizon, the horizon of the future. A horizon in which a cloud of divine promise can be seen in the very far distance.

The book of Deuteronomy also ends with looking at a horizon. The horizon here is more immediate. Moses is physically seeing the land.

But even this visible horizon is one that's only truly seen with the eyes of faith. Though right before us, the land appears not as a secured possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge. The way it's been presented throughout the book of Deuteronomy.

Even when in the land, Israel would have to recognize that they still must stand, as if with Moses, just outside of the land looking in. Their possession of the land is always a promise. It's always an unfinished and yet to be realized reality.

Depending upon their fellowship with and faithfulness to the Lord. And on historical occasions such as the ministry of John the Baptist, Israel is called to go outside of the land, to stand on the far side of the Jordan once again. To recognize that even when they are in the land, in the promised territory, they have not yet fully entered into possession of it.

A question to consider. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15 to 19, Moses declares, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire anymore lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

Earlier on in the book of Deuteronomy then, we're told that the Lord would raise up a prophet like Moses. At the very end of the book, we read that no prophet like Moses had arisen. We also discuss the way that a prophet like Moses could, rather than standing between the Lord and his people in a way that brought the two closer together, could actually serve to obstruct the maturer relationship that Israel was supposed to enter into.

How then could a prophet like Moses arise without causing this problem? Luke chapter 18 verses 1 to 30 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary.

For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that

she will not beat me down by her continual coming. And the Lord said, He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. God be merciful to me a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Now they were bringing even infants to him so that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

But Jesus called them to him, saying, Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it. And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You know the commandments, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honour your father and mother. And he said, All these I have kept from my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack.

Sell all that you have, and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, And who can be saved? But he said, What is impossible with man is possible with God. And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you.

And he said to them, Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life. The persistent widow at the beginning of Luke chapter 18 represents the oppressed righteous in Israel, waiting for salvation. The parable argues from the weaker to the stronger.

If even an unjust judge will respond, how much more the righteous God? The woman is calling out to be avenged by the representative of the law, against her adversary or oppressor. This is compared to the prayers of God's people for judgment against their oppressors. Her faith provides a model for the people of God to follow.

And such prayers for vengeance are found at various points in the Psalms, but also in such places as Revelation chapter 6 verse 10. They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Handled appropriately, it's not wrong to pray in such a

manner. As in Romans chapter 12 verse 19, we are not to avenge ourselves, but to give place to God's vengeance.

And it can be helpful when we're thinking about these prayers for vengeance, to consider David's imprecatory Psalms that were written while he was fleeing from Saul. And we read those alongside 1 Samuel's description of his actions, to see how not avenging ourselves and praying for God to avenge us need not conflict. The coming of the Son of Man then is here associated with his coming to avenge his persecuted people, and in part in response to their prayers.

Prayer is central in both of the opening parables in this chapter. We pray as those deserving nothing from God's hand, who trust his mercy. And the images of the people of the kingdom are striking here, a widow, a tax collector, infants, the poor.

If the second half of Luke chapter 17 is concerned with the manner of the coming of the kingdom of God, the when and the where, much of the chapter that follows addresses the manner in which people will receive its blessings. In a series of parables and teachings, Jesus presents this in terms of a number of different categories. In verses 1 to 8, vengeance.

In verses 9 to 14, vindication. In verses 15 to 17, reception. In verses 18 to 23, inheritance.

And in verses 24 to 30, entrance. While it might be easy to read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector merely as a teaching concerning contrasting private relationships individuals can have with God, when we situate the parable upon the broader canvas of Jesus' teaching regarding the coming kingdom, there are further dimensions that emerge. In particular, it underlines the fact that the actions of the various characters in this parable and the teachings that surround it, the persistent widow, the rich young ruler, the tax collector and the Pharisee, the disciples, are all oriented towards the horizon of a future and public action of God within Israel and the world's history.

That day would bring both vindication and judgment. It would be a deliverance and reward for some, and exclusion and shame for others. It would publicly reveal where everyone stood relative to God in his purposes for history.

For the Pharisee, that future was awaited with a blithe assurance that he would be vindicated within it. When he looked at his life, all the signs were propitious that he was in the right. He was a fine specimen of a true and faithful Israelite.

He guarded the nation's holiness. And as a result, he was free to engage in a sort of self-congratulation under the guise of a prayer of thanksgiving. His self-confidence was also powerfully bolstered by how favourably he appeared against the foil of others, the



extortionists, the unjust, the adulterers and the tax collector.

His high self-regard was inseparable from his habitual judgment of others. If the Pharisee was confident in his righteousness, the tax collector openly addressed God from a position of moral destitution and injustice. He threw himself upon the divine mercy.

Facing the prospect of God's coming just kingdom, the tax collector is well aware of where he stands relative to it. The Pharisee's self-righteous presumption of his own standing, his assumption that he was on the right side of history, one who would receive future praise and vindication, manifested a deep perversion of what it meant to relate to the Lord. In Jesus' teaching, the kingdom of God is one in which we are all found to be on the wrong side of history.

If the blessings of God's justice are to be received, they must be received as pure mercy and grace, from a position of weakness, dependence, lack and confessed injustice. As we find ourselves in such a position, justification no longer provides us with the grounds for condemning others in self-assured righteousness. The tax collector goes home justified, because although unworthy, as he's one who appreciates his utter lack, he's able to receive the divine gift of the kingdom's fullness.

To the degree that we resist perceiving ourselves as radically unjust, morally insufficient, subject to condemnation, and as willfully and extensively complicit in forms of evil, we disqualify ourselves from entry into the justice of the kingdom. The justice of the kingdom comes in the form of forgiveness, and to receive forgiveness you must acknowledge your wrong, and your insufficiency, and your failure, and your need to receive the kingdom, as a gracious act of God in mercy towards you. None of us stands securely on the right side of history.

Rather, like the tax collector, we must reach out in humility from our moral destitution, seeking divine mercy like humble and needy beggars. After this, the disciples seek to prevent children from being brought to Jesus to be blessed, but Jesus tells them not to do so. While the disciples presumably thought that the young children were distractions from the business of men, they lacked honour and status, and they should not be given so much attention, for Jesus they were quite the opposite.

They were models of the way that the kingdom is to be received. Our section of this chapter is concluded with a description of a ruler coming to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Many read this passage thinking that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law, driving the man to despair of his righteousness.

That's not actually how the story goes. Jesus teaches that the commandments are necessary for entering into life. The twist is in how this is understood.

He highlights the commandments that relate to our relationship with our neighbours in particular. Although he does not mention the tenth commandment, you shall not covet, that commandment will be fulfilled as the ruler sells what he has and gives to the poor. And the commandments are kept on a deeper level still by following Christ himself.

When he lists the commandments to the ruler, Jesus only lists from those commandments that concern loving your neighbour. How is the ruler to obey the command to love God? By giving up the thing that he is most attached to, money, and following Jesus. Jesus implicitly asks for the loyalty that belongs to God here.

And we can see the parable of the unjust steward in the background. The rich ruler should sell what he has, make friends with the poor with his money, and then he will have great riches in heaven. This exchange highlights once again the danger of riches, as things that weigh us down and prevent us from serving and following our true master.

This should also make us uncomfortable. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us. However, while there is no general requirement to sell all that we have and to give to the poor, Christ does call us to that same sort of loyalty.

Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom. Wealth is something that can master us. We think that we possess wealth, but often it's our wealth that possesses us, and we should be very, very fearful.

This is why Jesus gives the most incredible warnings against riches, that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. However, those who give up things for the kingdom are promised a return, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age, and we should be prepared to renounce our riches and follow Christ, to give up whatever it is that tethers our hearts to this age, to commit ourselves to the kingdom, and we'll find that we are richer for it. In laying down our lives, we'll finally secure them.

The disciples have shown their loyalty to Christ and their faith in Jesus by their actions. They've left everything to follow him, and they will be richly blessed both in this present time and in the age to come. We gain much as we follow Jesus, even in this present life.

The need to receive God's kingdom from a position of lack or destitution is a recurring theme within Luke 18. The widow addresses the unjust judge from a position of social powerlessness. In receiving the kingdom as a little child, we do so as those who are weak and dependent.

In light of the kingdom, the rich ruler's paradoxical lack is his abundance, something that he must surrender in order to inherit the kingdom aright. Finally, the disciples are promised a reward in the age to come as they have left houses, parents, brothers, wives, and children. The tax collector who seeks God's mercy from a position of moral

unworthiness is the true heir, rather than the Pharisee who presumes his entitlement.

If the coming of the kingdom is not as people would have expected it, the receiving of it is not either. A question to consider, why do the righteous need to be persistent in their prayers for justice if God is a just judge?