
Deuteronomy 34

Letting Go: The Ultimate Test of Faith

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This month our theme is faith. We have talked about faith using the story of Moses-which illustrates many different kinds of faith. We started with the call of Moses, and how Moses learned to have faith in himself because God had faith in him. We went on to look at the time when the waters parted and Moses led the people across from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the wilderness. We talked about how much faith it takes to step out into new territory in those moments in life when the way seems to open for you. Last week we talked about the times in the desert when the people gave up on the whole venture, and rebelled against Moses and begged to go back home to Egypt because the journey was too hard for them. We talked about how to maintain your faith when you are tested to the breaking point, and everything seems to be going wrong. Today we look at the final chapter in Moses' life. The Bible says that Moses took the people for forty years from Egypt and through the long journey to freedom, but that Moses never got there himself. As they were approaching the Promised Land Moses was either too weak or too old, but he could not travel any further. So he went up Mount Nebo and looked out over the plains that led up to the River Jordan, and into the land of Israel. There he had one final talk with God. God told him that Moses would not get to go all the way, but because he had been so faithful he could take a look at where his people would be going. He would have to leave them at the edge of the Promised Land. His protégé Joshua would take them on from here.

The Bible says that Moses died on Mount Nebo in this lovely place with a view of the desert behind and Israel ahead. The Bible goes to great lengths to describe the grand view that Moses saw that day, how the land stretched to the sea and how majestic it was and how full of promise. Deuteronomy

tells us that there was no one like Moses, so no one really knows why God did not allow Moses to go into the Promised Land. The Bible blames it on some petty moment of weakness when Moses doubted along the way, but here in Deuteronomy, it says that Moses was old and his time had come.

What can we learn about faith from this story in which Moses let go of his dream?

In the first place, letting go is humbling.

Moses loved his people. They were not always easy to love, but they had history together and their relationship had been tried and tested, over and over. Moses had been the visionary for this whole journey. He had been their wisdom when no one knew where to go. He had been their inspiration when they needed rules and their judge when they disagreed. He had listened to them in good times and bad. While they knew the impact he had on them, I imagine the Hebrews never realized what the people meant to him. They were his life, his heart and soul, and now he had to step back and allow them to go on without him. Now he had to cut the umbilical cord.

Most parents don't fully appreciate how humbling it will be to raise their children. In the beginning you feel like a mother bird hovering over the nest and feeding them so tenderly. But over time, good parents realize that they need to be ready to push their offspring out of the nest or they will never learn to fly. Good human parents give their children strong roots and a firm foundation, but they also encourage them to take wing and fly. The fact that you know this does not always make it easy. It is not easy when you bring your child to preschool and they don't want to go in and they are holding onto your leg with their little death grip and the teacher tells you it is time, and you have to be careful not to show your own ambivalence. Good parents have to learn to let go and that means letting go inside, in your heart.

One of the great things about Moses was that he knew his own weaknesses. He recognized his limits. When he started this journey and God called him to face Pharaoh, Moses replied to God saying, "Who am I?" We might see that comment as a sign of weakness, but it is really a sign of strength. Humility is always the first step in the faith journey. It is in that humble moment when Moses realized his own limits that he decided he was over his head and so he cultivated a relationship with God, who became his strength throughout the journey.

Faith is not easy. None of the steps of faith are easy ones, but you begin to grow in faith when you see your own limitations and that is one humbling moment. But it is also the moment when a new door opens to a deeper relationship with God. We practice letting go all through our lives. But that does not mean it ever really gets easy to do.

This week Charlie Rose interviewed Warren Buffet, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway. He was on the show because Buffet has given his sizable fortune to his sons, and Howard, a farmer from Illinois has written a book about philanthropy. Howard's book is entitled *Forty Chances*, and it is based on the notion that a farmer has forty growing seasons in his lifetime and so he gets forty opportunities to get it right. Howard Buffet contends that philanthropy is hard too and even with billions of dollars to work with, it will be a challenge that offers him a finite number of opportunities to stop hunger or change the world, which he hopes to do. What surprised me was that throughout the interview, over and over, Warren Buffet talked about how fortunate he had been to be born in the United States in 1930 and to have so many opportunities. He took so little credit for his remarkable achievements as the best investment mind of this century. Only a very humble person would keep saying how much of his success was pure luck. Only a humble man would give his children most of his money with so few strings attached. Only a humble man would appreciate their efforts and be so gracious about them. The senior Buffet smiled and laughed throughout the interview. Letting go is humbling, but that's a good thing.

It is humbling to realize that you are not God. You are not always essential. You can do your best, and then let it go. It is humbling to see that as essential as you have been, there are times when you need to step aside and allow someone else to take the journey the rest of the way.

Finally, letting go of things is freeing.

The night before he was shot, Martin Luther King Jr. must have had a strong premonition because he spoke about this passage from scripture. Martin Luther King was referring to this story when he gave his last speech on April 3, 1968 in a church in Memphis. He started his remarks that night telling the people that they would prevail no matter what obstacles lay ahead. King went on to say that he had been to the top of the mountain and the Lord has allowed me to see the Promised Land. I might not get there with you but I know you will get to the Promised Land. I am not worried about anything. I am not worried about living a long time; Longevity has its place. But I am doing God's will. I am not fearing any man. I am happy tonight. I may not get there with you. Dr. King was shot dead the next day.

Mount Nebo is a powerful place. When we took our first trip to Israel, we started in Jordan and this mountain is there. Though I had preached about Moses many times by then, I was not prepared for the power of this place, where he was supposed to have died. As you ascend the high mountain it is windy and you catch your breath as you reach the summit and take in the spectacular view of the land of Israel in the distance over the Jordan River. There is a chapel at the top with a round chancel and above the altar are modern stained glass windows all depicting different moments in the life of Moses – the burning bush, confronting Pharaoh, crossing the Dead Sea, getting water from a rock, bringing the Ten Commandments. The primary colors of these magnificent windows flood the room with light, as people feel something that is hard to describe, like Moses' spirit is somehow closer to you. We sat in silence contemplating this man, his journey, his impact on the world. We thought too about all those times when faith asked a lot of us. One young woman in her twenties, next to me was weeping. When

you climb Mount Nebo and sit there you remember the times your faith was tested or strengthened.

You remember what a gift it is to be alive, and to have so many chances to get it right.