

Passing the Baton

In Search of Leadership – Part II

Numbers 20 & 27; Deuteronomy 31 & 34; Hebrews 11

Introduction

In our study today, we will come to the end of the life of the man who, up to this point, was the greatest patriarch in Israel's history – the man we know as Moses. We will turn our attention to the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Review –

Reasons Moses Could Not Enter the Promised Land

First, however, we will review an act that would disqualify Moses from leading the people into the Promised Land. I do not think it is possible to understand the emotion and all that is involved in the heart and life of Moses, without going back and taking a look at what happened at the waters of Meribah.

Turn to Numbers 20:8 and note what God tells Moses to do.

Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.

Continue to Numbers 20:9-10, where Moses begins to obey the Lord. Understand, however, that the congregation is grumbling and complaining.

So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?"

There are four things in this act that I believe, disqualify Moses from leading the people into the Promised Land.

1. First this was an act of pride.

Let us read Moses' words in Numbers 20:10b again,

. . . "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?"

Moses was, in effect, putting himself in the place of God. Instead of directing the people's eyes to the power of God, who would bring water out of that rock, he said, "Shall *we* . . .".

This was an act of pride.

2. Secondly, this was an act of rebellion.

Look at Numbers 20:11a.

Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; . . .

Moses was angry. He takes his rod and hits that rock twice, in rebellion against God's command.

Continue to Numbers 20:11b.

. . . and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

God will use rebellious leaders for the benefit of His people, as we talked about in our last discussion.

3. Thirdly, this was an act of independence from what God said.

Note Numbers 20:12a.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, . . ."

In other words, "You have not trusted Me. You have, in effect, said, 'There is a better way to deal with these rebellious people. I'll strike the rock.'"

As a leader, we cannot act or work independently of the clear revelation of God, and Moses had.

4. Fourthly, this was an act of disrespect.

This is found in God's words in Numbers 20:12b-13,

“. . . to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them. Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the Lord, and He proved Himself holy among them.”

We learn, in a later passage, that God considered Moses to be taking glory to himself, because He would say that because of this act, Moses had rebelled and taken glory from God.

Ladies and gentlemen, whether we like to think about it or not; whether we like to consider the fact or not, there is laid at the feet of a leader, of a teacher, of one of influence, a great command.

I think this is the reason James writes,

Let not many of you become teachers, . . . knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (James 3:1)

I do not think God was too hard on Moses. I know it broke Moses' heart, but God has a high standard for those who will lead and who will influence. Although Moses was forgiven, there was a long-lasting consequence to his rebellion, his independence, his pride, and his disrespect.

Because of this, let us turn to Numbers 27:12-14, where we read what happened shortly after.

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.

"When you have seen it, you too will 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.)

Why would God lead Moses up to the mountain and say, "Moses, look at all of this land – but you can't go in.?"

Is God like a cruel father holding a lollipop out to his son, and then saying, "Oh, you weren't quick enough – it's in my pocket.?"

I do not believe God was dealing cruelly with Moses. He was, in effect, giving Moses a great blessing by allowing him to see the land. And, even more, God was letting Moses know, "I keep My word."

For forty years Moses has believed the word of God that He would give to the people of Israel, the land. So God brings Moses up on the mountain, shows him the land, and says, "I will give it to them. There will just be a different leader taking them in."

The Introduction of Joshua

Now there are only two potential candidates for the job as leader of the people of Israel. You may remember that Joshua was one. Do you remember who the other was? Caleb.

To discover the reason Caleb was not chosen, I think perhaps, the only verse we can turn to would be earlier in Numbers. We are told in Numbers 11:28 that Joshua was the assistant of Moses from his youth.

In other words, there had been a grooming process; a discipling process for the leadership that, at that point, Moses did not know would occur. God, however, had instigated this pattern of the older, wiser man taking the younger man and leading him along, because that younger man would one day, fill the shoes of this old saint; this patriarch.

As I studied this passage, I think the most amazing thing about the character of Moses is what happens next. Moses did not say, "Well, since I can't lead them in, I'm throwing in the towel now. Just take me home."

Instead of a word of resentment or bitterness, Moses responds so differently. In fact, we never hear a word of resentment from Moses.

Now imagine for a moment, that you have the lead role in a Broadway play. You are it – the spotlight is on you! There are only two months to go before the first production and the director comes to you and says, "Listen, I'm going to replace you with another person to take your role. That individual is out of town and will be for another month, so I want you to go ahead and play the role in the rehearsals for the benefit of the rest of the cast."

What kind of actor or actress would you be now? I can see you going through the lines, "Hark, [whatever] . . .," but you would have no heart in it. Why? Because you know that a replacement is coming.

Moses was told by God that he would be replaced. What *great* character he displays in the fact that he continues to lead and has such gracious words to Joshua himself.

Important principles of transferring leadership

Two things strike me about the passing of this baton.

1. First, Moses did not choose his successor, but allowed for God's choice.

Look at Numbers 27:15-16.

Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation,"

Now it is the tendency of strong leaders to appoint their successors. Why? Because they want someone like themselves; they want a carbon copy. They think, "Listen, I've lived this thing along this far, for heaven's sake, so the guy or gal that comes in next and takes over this ministry needs to be a replica of myself. What would happen to the ministry if it were any different?"

However, let us look at how different Joshua is from Moses.

Moses was trained by the greatest scholars of Egypt in his first forty years. He was a refined man who had been groomed for the court. He was the Pharaoh-elect.

Joshua was trained in the desert. He was rugged. He was the kind of man who, when Moses said, "I need twelve men to risk their lives," said, "Oh, take me! I'll do it."

Moses had experience leading the army. In fact, we learn from Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, of an interesting tradition. When the Ethiopians were attacking Memphis, the capital of Egypt, and were banging on the doors, Moses, the Pharaoh-elect, stepped forward, as the Pharaohs did in that day. He commandeered the army and routed the Ethiopians and had a great victory. Moses had experience under his belt as a great leader.

Joshua had been a spy, but that was nearly a disaster as he had to hide on the roof of a brothel underneath stacks of flax.

However, then and now, God is not interested in cloning people. He is not interested in carbon copy ministries. He is a God of incredible variety.

Look at our church. Look at the variety of ministries in His church and family. It reveals that God is not interested in necessarily keeping the status quo; in fact, at times, He needs to break it.

Moses, who was a great leader, would never be mirrored by Joshua, who was so different.

I want those of you who are leading to take heart if you are in need of someone to take your place. Do

not try to find someone just like you. In fact, allow God to choose the successor.

If you are someone who is being asked to fill a position; to begin doing a job; to take over a ministry, do not look at the current person and say, "Look at them – how adequate and competent they are. Who am I?"

I am sure such thoughts went through Joshua's mind, yet he filled the position.

It is interesting that Moses knew God would choose best, so he got out of the way and allowed God to choose.

2. Secondly, Moses was not interested in appearances, but opted for godly character.

Look at Numbers 27:16b-18.

“. . . appoint a man over the congregation,

“ who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep which have no shepherd.”

So the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him;"

God said, "We're looking for a man who is controlled by My Spirit. Joshua is a spiritual man."

I think this gives more credence to the character of Moses. Moses could have come along and said, "We need an impressive man who looks sharp. We need a man with an adequate education and all the tools. We need someone who mirrors my training; who is on top. Let's see . . . who do we have in the camp that fits this?"

This is the problem that Samuel had. Samuel was told by God that one of the boys belonging to Jesse's family would be the king. So Samuel trots along and goes up to Jesse and says, "Let me see your sons."

Jesse brings out the firstborn, Eliab, who is a handsome fellow. The Bible gives a description or an idiom that reveals this guy was impressive. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Samuel thinks, "This has got to be him. This is the one."

You may remember that God says, "No. I'm not looking at stature. I'm not looking at the credentials. I'm looking at the heart."

Did you notice that Moses says, “God, bring someone along who has the heart of a shepherd.”?

This could be translated, “Bring someone along who loves people.”

Why? Because someone with all the tools may not really like people. Appearances can be so deceiving.

Let me share a story that has always stuck in my mind. A farmhand, by the name of Jim, got a job at the farm of a rather prosperous farmer. He cleaned the barn and took care of the animals and, at night, stayed in the loft. Jim fell in love with the farmer’s daughter and eventually, was ready to propose marriage. As was the custom in that day, he asked the father first. However, the father turned him down, telling him, “You have no prospect in life. You’re a farmhand.”

Jim, in time, left that farm. More than thirty years went by and the farmer decided to tear down his barn and build a bigger, better one. As the beams over the loft were being removed, the farmer noticed, scratched into one of the beams, the full name of Jim. It was James A. Garfield, who, at that time, was President of the United States.

Now this farmer is not the first person who has misspoken – we have too. I enjoy studying history, including all the skeptics over the years who have said things to people that they did not feel were impressive. I came across some instances that were quite interesting.

The emperor Ferdinand, after the very first performance of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, went up to Mozart and said, “Mozart, far too noisy, far too many notes.”

Phillip Hale, a Boston music critic, wrote, in 1837, ten years after Beethoven’s death, “If Beethoven’s *Seventh Symphony* is not shortened, it will soon fall into disuse.”

John Hunt, an English art critic, wrote, “Rembrandt can never be compared to our extraordinarily gifted English artist, Mr. Rippengill.” – whoever that is!

Then, there is the Munich schoolmaster who told ten-year-old Albert Einstein words that Einstein never forgot, “You will never amount to very much.”

The problem is that we have this same attitude in the church. We have something we could refer to as, “the yearbook mentality”.

Do you remember the time when you graduated from high school and turned in your school yearbook to the page that read, “Most Likely to Succeed”? There was the picture of the epitome of credentials: attractive with a list of all the accomplishments. I daresay most of us did not make that page.

In the church, we have a silent, invisible yearbook in which we tend to check people into categories. We think, “No, that young person will never succeed – not much on the ball. That individual is not a leader. And no, that one is not a teacher.”

Why? Because we are all hung up on the things that Moses had been able to hurdle. He said, when it came to leadership, “God, give us a man who loves people.”

We should be saying, “God, give us women who love people; who love the children they teach. Give us men with love in their hearts for people, for Christ’s church, for the ministry which involves people.”

This is the criteria.

How great do you think Joshua would become as a leader? The issue is not really what you and I think, is it? It is what God thinks. And God knew Joshua was the man.

Now turn in your Bible to Deuteronomy chapter 31, which chronicles the significant event of Moses transferring the baton of leadership to Joshua.

This is a public transfer of authority, which is very important because it must be seen by the congregation. In this act, Moses’ character shines through again.

Look at Deuteronomy 31:7-8.

Then Moses called to Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall give it to them as an inheritance. The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

Moses did not get up in front of the people and say, “Joshua is my replacement and I’m real excited about this. God wanted me to tell you something, Joshua. Let’s see . . . where is that note? Oh, here it is. Uh, ‘Be strong and courageous. Don’t be afraid, God will be with you. Amen.’”

Use your imagination and go back to this place and time. See a one hundred twenty-year-old man standing on some windswept crest where all the people could see him, reaching out his arms to a young man named Joshua. Hear him saying, “Joshua, be strong and courageous. God is with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

This was not trite to Moses. It was not like throwing Romans 8:28 in someone’s lap. For Moses, this was tested. Moses knew it to be the truth. He could say to Joshua, “God will *never* leave you – I know because He never left me. So be strong and be courageous. I’ve tested this and it is true.”

The Death of Moses

Now turn to Deuteronomy chapter 34, where we will briefly observe the last splash on the canvas of Moses’ life.

Look at Deuteronomy 34:1-3.

Now 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,

and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea,

and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.

Can you imagine the sweep of Moses’ gaze? He is probably saying, “Oh, look at that! That’s beautiful. Wow! Oh, that’s fantastic! This is the land!”

I am sure he was not crying in his soup, but was thrilled, as he thought, “This is the land that God promised to give to the people!”

I want to mention two things about Moses’ death.

1. First, Moses died with great security.

Moses was not lonely there, although he was alone with God. No one was allowed to come. He would be buried in an unmarked grave that no one would know existed. No one would ever be able to find it and I am glad. If someone found it, they would be selling pop corn and cotton candy up there and many shrines would be surrounding it. This was not a place to be worshiped. This was a sacred place, and it was between Moses and “Yahweh,” his God.

We read in Deuteronomy 34:4-5,

Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; 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.”

The phrase “the word of the Lord,” is a beautiful Hebrew phrase. Moses literally, died at the mouth of God. The scriptures will tell us, in fact, that his strength was not abated. He made that one mile hike up Pisgah with no trouble. He is not huffing and puffing as he climbs, but is in great shape. Then, God with His mouth; with one word said, “Moses, it’s time.”

So do not pity Moses. In fact, what an example this is to those of us who know Jesus Christ as our personal Savior.

One day, not by coincidence or by mistake, God will say, “Go on.” We can then go with great security, being in Christ.

If we had had the opportunity to ask Moses, just before he died, “Moses, was it worth it? Forty heart-breaking years in the desert, was it worth it?”

He would have said, “I believe, with all of my heart, yes, it was. Because of it, I came to know God in such a magnificent way. And what a privilege He gave me. Me, Moses – the one kicking and screaming back there at the burning bush, ‘No, God, not me – somebody else.’ Oh, how thankful I am that I said, “Yes,” even though it was a halting, “Yes,” and entered that ministry. It was worth it.”

2. Secondly, Moses died without grand sensationalism.

Look at Deuteronomy 34:6-8. It is interesting to note who buried Moses.

And He [God] buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.

Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated.

So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end.

Do you know what I find fascinating in this? It is the fact that because Moses, as the book of Hebrews tells us, at one point said, “No,” to Egypt and, “Yes,” to God, Moses turned his back on joining rank with the great Pharaohs of Egypt. Perhaps, if he had said, “Yes,” there would be some massive pyramid in his honor or there would be a sphinx with his face on the body of a lion. But Moses said, “No,” and on this hill is an unknown, unmarked grave.

There was no sensationalism in Moses’ death. In fact, I think he would have been surprised to find out that the people cried for thirty days for him. They had never done that before. It is interesting that the people decided, “Let’s now say, ‘Thanks,’” or whatever.

This reminds me of reading about a time that Abraham Lincoln went to the funeral of one of his generals. Many wonderful things were being said about the general. Lincoln remarked to one of his aids, “If the general had known that he would get a funeral like this, he would have died a lot sooner.”

I think Moses would have been shocked to know.

Thirty days of mourning is not the standard, by the way. The standard is seven days. The people wept for him and, I think, probably realized then, the leader that Moses was.

Let me pause just long enough to mention that a funeral is not a very good place; in fact, it is a very unfulfilling place to tell someone, “Thank you,” or “I love you,” or “I appreciate you.”

I think Moses would have been shocked to know of the reaction of the people and would have said, “Thirty days? They never wept for me before. They rebelled against me.”

Now the people realized. What a lesson to us to *now*, while we live, share our love.

Application – Attitudes Toward Ministry

Let me tie this up with two thoughts. This comes from Hebrews chapter 11, as it reviews the life of Moses.

Let me give Moses’ two primary attitudes toward ministry. These are the two motivations that, I believe, kept Moses going.

1. Number one, Moses knew his reward was greater than his tribulations.

We read in Hebrews 11:24-26,

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,

choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,

considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Moses left the riches of Egypt and knew the reproach of Christ would be great, but, as it says in this text, he kept in his sight, the reward.

Moses knew something of which we must refresh our memories – we will one day give account of our ministry and of our labors. The further down the pike I get, the more I am impressed with the thought that, in the Kingdom, we will be given positions of ruling with Him, depending on how we have served Him now.

Think about the fact that there will come a day when God will dole out the responsibilities. He will say, “Sam or Cindy or Steve, step right up here. This is how you will rule with Me for a thousand years.”

If we live in the light of this happening, how would we live now?

The text says that in the mind’s eye of Moses was the reward. Moses knew it was far greater than any temporal earthly rewards.

2. Secondly, Moses believed his God was greater than his inabilities.

You might say, “I can’t lead. I can’t minister. I don’t have the experience. I don’t have the tools.”

What you are actually saying, my friend, is not that you believe *you* are too small, but that you believe *God* is too small. You are saying, in effect, “God, You are not big enough to equip me. You are not great enough to lead me.”

We need to set aside the thoughts that our secular society builds into us; that is, we must be some impressive type of individual and have all the credentials. The greatest people that have marked the church have been the uneducated, the untrained, but have been people who were totally dedicated to the cause of Jesus Christ.

Like Moses, in his early days, you back away from the ministry. Do you remember the day when he kicked and screamed and came up with all those reasons? You probably have reasons as well. Maybe

you never made the Dean's list. Maybe you are unimpressive. You might be a six foot, two inch, thirteen-year-old girl or a four foot, eleven inch, fifty-year-old man. It does not matter.

One thought that has struck me about studying this, and we will further study Joshua later, is that Joshua would never be as significant in Israel's history as Moses – never. In fact, the text tells us that there has never been a greater prophet among the Israelites than Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Joshua would never be as significant to Israel as Moses, but, ladies and gentlemen, Joshua was just as significant to God as Moses. And that is the issue.

The issue is not significance here – it is significance to God. It is God's choice. It is God's selection. It is God's use. It is pleasing God. It is fulfilling God's work that He asks of us.

When it comes to leadership, God asks two questions:

- Do you love people?
- Do you believe that I am big enough, great enough, and powerful enough to equip you to minister to people?

The question is not, "Is God available to us?" I think the ultimate question, ladies and gentlemen, is, "Are we available to God?"