

Close, But No Prize

In the name of the Lord of Glory, dear friends in Christ: I expect that you have walked through a carnival midway that featured all sorts of games of skill. There are galleries where you fire pellet guns at various targets, throw balls to knock down bottles, toss rings over pegs, and cast darts at balloons – all kinds of games. To entice you play, there are eye-catching prizes on display. They dangle in front of your face. For kids there are giant stuffed animals and cool toys that for some strange reason you only ever see at carnivals. For older folks there are binoculars and cameras and other such gadgets. All you have to do to play is pay a small fee – worth only a fraction of the value of the prizes. And for that small fee you have so many attempts to win. The carnies, the folks who work these games, are good at what they do too. It's their job to draw your attention to the prizes and show you how incredibly easy it is to win them. Why, they're practically giving them away. They call, cajole, sweet talk—anything to get you to play. Then while you're playing, they egg you on: "Oh, that was so close; you nearly had it. Care to try again?"

The trouble is that the games are never as easy as they look. The guns don't shoot straight. The bottles you're to knock over are weighted with lead. Those rings don't quite fit over the pegs you're to get them on. It looks like it should be easy; but if you think about it, you know it can't be. The reason they have these games is because they make a lot of money from them. I expect that a big part of every carnie's job is having to dust all those prizes – because rarely do they give one away. No, the last thing you almost always hear a carnie say is, "Close, but no prize. Who wants to be the next to try?"

Now, the last thing I'd ever want to do is compare the Lord God to a professional carnie; but I think there's at least one point of comparison that emerges in this morning's Old Testament lesson. There we find the Lord's faithful servant Moses climbing the rugged slope of Mount Nebo to the top of Pisgah's peak. Though he is now one hundred and twenty years old, the climb is easy for him. He's still full of strength and vitality because the Lord has miraculously kept him from the deterioration of age. He began his ascent early this morning from plains of Moab on the east side of Jordan River where the children of Israel are camped. They've taken forty long years to arrive at this point. Forty years of sojourn in the desert wasteland under Moses' leadership ... forty years of living in tents and being constantly on the move, walking on scorching sand and being blasted by hot desert winds. It was in part a punishment for their lack of faith; but it was also a lesson in faith building – the Lord reinforcing their confidence that what he has promised, he will provide. Now, after all these years of living day to day only upon the mercy and Word of God, they get it. And now, very soon, they will all cross the river and begin to take possession of the Promised Land.

All of them except Moses. The Lord has other plans for him. He's directed Moses to make this climb to give him a good, long look at the eagerly anticipated prize. After forty years of seeing nothing but rocks, sand, and scrub brush, what a sight it must have been. From the heights of Nebo he could look westward and see the Judean hills covered with lush green grass and trees. He could see lakes, streams, orchards, cultivated fields, and vineyards; and in the distance, the coastal low lands and the dazzling sun reflecting off the blue water of the Mediterranean. To the north, there was the snow-capped peak of Mount Hermon overlooking the Sea of Galilee, to the northwest were the famed cedar forests of Lebanon, and to the south he could see the desert of Negev. That's where they had been forty years earlier when the Lord first lay this land open before them. Then Moses had urged the people forward to take possession of it – but they had refused to go. They were afraid of the inhabitants of the land, afraid that they would all be killed in battle, afraid that God who had delivered them from Egypt with powerful miracles and who had led them

thus far would abandon them. With sad disappointment Moses remembered the day that the Lord had said to him, “Fine, if they don’t trust me to give them the land, then let them live – and die – in the desert. Let them learn the hard way that they are to trust in me and in me alone.”

Preparing for this message, I came across commentaries that spoke of how gracious God was to give Moses this panoramic vista of the land he had so long hoped for. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t see it that way. Imagine standing in Moses’ place. I suppose there would be some satisfaction in knowing that you had reached journey’s end and that the promise to the people was being fulfilled. But overshadowing that feeling would be something else. “There it is, Moses: that’s the great goal you’ve labored so hard all these years to lead these people to; all those years of hard living in the desert, and you having to bear the brunt of their constant complaining. You really did a splendid job. And now you see spreading out before you their great inheritance: the land that I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants forever ... Doesn’t it look wonderful? Isn’t it everything I promised? And oh, by the way, *you can’t have it*. You’re so close Moses, so very close; but sorry: you lose. No prize for you.

This is gracious? “After all you’ve done for me, you get to die in the desert; but just for fun let’s look behind curtain number three to see the prize you might have won”? Sounds more like the Greek myth of Tantalus. Maybe you remember that story. Because of some terrible sin committed in his life, Tantalus finds himself in Hades, condemned by the gods to stand in a lake with the water level right up to lower lip. Above and before his face hang rich clusters of ripe, juicy grapes. But if he extends his hand for them, they quickly retreat out of his reach. Likewise, just as fast as he can stoop down for a drink, the water level in the lake recedes. So he suffers constantly from agonizing thirst – which suffering is made all the more intense because relief is always just inches away, but he can’t get to it. It’s always just out of reach. The Greeks understood this to be an ingenious torture. Somehow we’re supposed to believe that when God did something similar to Moses it was an act of kindness? I don’t think so.

And what did Moses do that was so terrible that the Lord condemned him to this treatment? Was he a prolific adulterer? Had he been dealing dishonestly with God’s people all these years, betraying his sacred trust? Had he been lording it over them or oppressing them? You’d think that it would have to be something really evil. But no, not at all; in fact the text goes on about what a *great* man Moses was – absolutely no one like him, who served the Lord and did all those wonders, and who knew God face to face. Certainly his record of faithfulness was equal to or better than anyone who would be making the crossing. So, what was it that caused him to be excluded? To be given only the opportunity to look, but not go in?

It turns out that it was one little mistake made in a moment when Moses was quite justifiably angry with the people he was leading. It happened very near the end of the 40-year journey. After having been miraculously supplied with all they needed to survive every single day for 40 years, the Israelites came to a place where there was no water. Immediately some of them began wailing about how the Lord, that cruel, hardhearted oppressor, had brought them *all* this way only to kill them now of thirst. It was his plan all along. Moses was furious that they could think such a thing. Nevertheless, the Lord directed him to go ahead and give them water. He told Moses to speak to a certain rock outcropping, which would then bubble forth with a spring. But in his anger with the people, Moses stormed over to the rock and said (more or less), “You miserable, unfaithful people! Can’t you trust God for anything? Do you want water? Do you want me to beat it out of this rock with my staff?” Moses proceeded to do exactly that. He gave the rock a hard smack. And sure enough, a spring of water erupted from its base. The people were satisfied; but the Lord told Moses, “That act of disobedience is going to cost you. I told you to speak a *word*, and instead you struck with your staff. As a result, you lose. You can’t go into the Promised Land.”

That seems an awfully heavy-handed penalty for so small a trespass. Surely, we think, the Lord who is so gracious and forgiving could overlook this one little act of stupidity done in a moment of extreme agitation – especially when you consider that it was the Lord’s own good name that Moses was defending. C’mon, can’t there be a second chance? A way to make it up? What happened to “the Lord who is slow to anger and abounding in love ... who does not treat us as our sins deserve”? But no dice: Moses ran up against a wall as hard as the rock he struck. You were close, Moses, so very close; but no prize for you. You only get to see what you can’t have. That’s just brutal. And since this isn’t consistent with the character of the Lord God whom we worship, it leads to the inescapable conclusion that he must have had a very good reason for treating Moses in this way ... a reason ... a *message* that he wants us to hear.

As it turns out, there are several lessons illustrated here: First, we have to understand that Moses is more than just any man; he’s the one through whom God gave the Law. In a sense, he’s the living embodiment of the Law. Future generations will use his name as a synonym for the commandments of God. They won’t say to criminals, “You broke the Law”, they’ll say, “You’ve defied Moses”. And what the Law does is extend to you a great promise. It’s the promise of the blessed life both in the present and also with the Lord in paradise. The Law can show you what that looks like. It can stand you on the mountain, so to speak, where you can see all the blessings God wants to give to his faithful people. But the promise attached to the Law is conditional: only if you obey it do you win – *then* you’ll live and be blessed by God; but if you disobey it, you lose – you’ll be cursed and die. It doesn’t matter how close you come. You have to obey in every minute detail. No matter how close you come to perfection, commit one sin however small and you lose. No prize for you.

This truth has serious implications for us. One is that it should put to rest forever the myth of the righteous unbeliever. We’ve all heard people speak so of someone who was good. It happens especially at funerals. “No”, they’ll say, “Pete or Sally wasn’t much on religion, didn’t see no use for it; but a better person you never met. Surely, if God’s fair, he’ll open up the pearly gates for that one.” You stand there listening to this sort of thing, nodding – and deep down inside you’d like to believe that it’s true. But it’s not. This text makes it clear. If Moses, who was God’s friend and servant, and who knew him face to face couldn’t get in on his record, then no one can.

Which leads to the second implication: if no one can get in on their record, neither can you – especially considering the fact that if you’re like me, your track record is more like the people who complained bitterly every time something failed to meet expectations than that of Moses. Surprisingly enough, that’s good news for us because those people did go in while Moses did not. They got the prize; Moses lost. How? Well, there was a change of leadership. Moses, the Law, can lead you to the Promised Land and show you what it looks like, but he cannot lead you in. That mission is reserved for someone else, a fellow named Joshua – which just happens to be the Hebrew form of the name *Jesus*. It means, “The Lord saves”. He’s the guy who can lead you to the other side of the river. Interestingly enough, he can only do it after Moses, the Law – but also the great deliverer of God’s people – has died. The Lord Jesus is the fulfillment of all these things: He’s our great Deliverer who embodies the Law of God perfectly in every detail. He’s the one who leads us through the wilderness of life, supplying all our needs. Yet, he dies in the wilderness on account of our faithlessness and disobedience. And in him, the Law that condemned us also dies. It’s buried by God in an unmarked grave and lost. But then, unlike Moses, this Joshua rises to life and leads us into the Promised Land. We get in not by obeying the Law, but by trusting in him.

I hope that’s clear, because now, at the risk of muddying the water, I’d like to take these ideas just a step further. Go back to Moses’ little sin at the rock, the one he hit with his staff. That didn’t seem like such a big deal to us; but I want you to see that it was actually one of the biggest mistakes that anyone in a position of leadership in the church can make. Moses was angry with

the people for their lack of trust. He expected more from them by now. The Lord, however, saw the people's need and wanted to provide for it – and in the act of providing, he knew that would give them more trust in him. This is key: Moses responds to the people's weakness with Law. "You should be better by now." God responds with Gospel: his unmerited gifts and love *that make the people better*. Moses then proceeds to *do with his hands* what the Lord had said should be done by the power of his Word alone. He takes what God intended as Gospel and tried to turn it into Law. This is every pastor or Bible teacher's great temptation: when things aren't going as well as he might wish, to attempt to produce results by action, by doing something, or by telling others what they should or should not be doing – that is, by the Law which can never be performed to standard – rather than accomplishing what God wants done in his people by the power of the Gospel that says everything has already been done to perfection by Christ. You have only to believe it. You, as God's people, need to be wary of this, and judge the words and teachings those who instruct you accordingly.

Understand that Moses didn't just hit a rock in his anger; he struck out against the grace of God for weak, miserable sinners. In fact, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that the rock Moses hit was Christ. And herein we have yet another Gospel image: Moses, the representation of the Law, strikes the Rock – contrary to the Word of God – just as years later those who sat in the seat of Moses would attack and condemn the Lord Jesus. But despite their disobedience to God, from that smitten Rock flowed water to give life and cleansing to God's people. God is faithful even when we are not.

That too is good news for us – and for Moses. Though for purposes of illustration the Lord treated him in a way that seems harsh, we shouldn't worry about him. He too is covered by the great sacrifice made by the Lord Jesus. And he too died in faith. Though he was denied access to his immediate goal, he was taken instead to the place the Promised Land only foreshadowed. There to him the glory of the Lord Jesus was first fully revealed – just as it was to the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration – and will be one day to each of us, when we too cross the river under his leadership and guiding. That will be the greatest prize of all. And it's already been won for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. To him be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!