

## **“The View from the Mountaintop: But What Is Our Destination?”<sup>1</sup>**

October 25, 2020

### **I**

Well Moses. It seems unfair, don't you think ... Moses dying before he can enter the Promised Land? 'Cause the life of Moses ends with God's puzzling remark found in our reading this morning: "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." And so Moses does not. He dies as the Lord has said, in the land of Moab; he dies where he is, not where he was going. And even his burial place to this day is a mystery.

Well, it's a strange end to a mighty epoch and a mighty life, isn't it ... almost as if the great Moses never was – like he was one of those that the book of Ecclesiasticus would later say, "And some there were who have no memorial, who have died as though they'd never been born."

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Now. This is not the immortality that we all crave, is it. No, to our fair-minded selves there appears to be something basically unfair, unjust about all of this. I mean, you might say Moses deserved better, and maybe you think ... if the truth be told ... so do I!

Now various writers have filled pages with guesses about what really happened to Moses ... why God prevented him from entering that promised land. Was he being punished for some hot-headed act committed in the desert? Was he being punished for the peoples' sins, a scapegoat for that golden calf escapade? But then ... others say it's just a mystery ... lost in the mysterious ways of God. Who knows why. 'Cause in the end, we simply don't know why Moses' journey ended on the top of Mt. Pizgah. Like so much of our life ... we just don't know why.

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'Course ... when you think about it ... sometimes that view from the top of the mountain in our own lives isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it. I mean, you struggle to the top only to see a future in a far-off land you cannot ... for some reason or other ... cannot enter. But on the other hand, maybe if you stand on Mt. Pizgah like Moses, that future you view is still filled with promise ... as well as risk. 'Cause without a doubt, that land that Moses finally glimpsed: That land flowed not only with milk and honey, but also was filled with rocks and rough terrain. Surprises and hardships and heartbreaks in store for those who ventured forth ... something like our own lives to this day.

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Well, what's your and my view from our own Mt. Pizgah today? A landscape of lost opportunity? An inheritance never to be collected? A future never to be enjoyed? There we are, folks today standing on Pizgah, peering into the land ahead and asking, "Is there any justice on

the land I see, any peace, any joy? Will that land be a place where I can make a living, raise a family, a place to love, work, play?

I mean, there's trouble everywhere, across the whole wide world, not just in third world, but in first world countries. And trouble right here in River City! The divorce rate is up, opioid addictions, suicide, racial land mines threaten. Violence and strife seem to be the rule, not the exception, And I guess folks just do expect less ... rather than more of life's good things.

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Well, our view from Pizgah is certainly a mixed picture, isn't it. And maybe it was for Moses too as he gazed out on it before he died. But now, here's the thing: Even though apparently this was the end of the trail for Moses, it was certainly not the end for his people. No, it was just the beginning of a whole new adventure for the covenant people of Israel ... and still is today, isn't it – still is to this day an adventure for you and me.

II

See, I believe that our future, while always unclear, still ... holds a blessing from God. 'Cause it is in the future where God sets God's promise. And it's into the future where He lures ... calls you and me. But I think it's also true that that future you and I can spy from our Pizgah is not a land all rosy and bright, of positive thinking and excess of every good imaginable kind.

But I still think it's a land of opportunity. 'Cause it's God's future and God is in it going before us ... preparing the way ... calling you and me to join with Him in that journey that takes us from where we are ... to where we are to be. And I believe the sheer joy of that trip is in this journey that you and I are on.

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But here's the real question: The journey to where? Where are we finally going? I mean, if you take the longest view ... where is your and my destination?

Well here's my answer: See, Moses' view from Pizgah was as nothing, compared to the vision of that far future that I believe awaits you and me – that new heaven and new earth where every tear is wiped away, where there shall be an end to death, an end to mourning and to crying and to pain; for the old order has passed away.

See, that vision that runs from Pizgah right through to the book of Revelation is the vision given to all those who would see ... as God gives them light; to see in what is ... to see what can and what ought to be. 'Cause the Bible ends as Moses did, with a vision, a revelation of the things that are to be.

### III

A few years back I read a book by N. T. Wright titled Surprised by Hope. And in it, Wright explores our expectations for a “new heaven and a new earth,” searching scripture and tradition to lay out a vision of what happens at our death and beyond. In short, Wright convincingly argues that our immediate life after death is a transition time of rest. But the ultimate end is the promise of a redeemed, resurrected and transformed creation, including the resurrection of our embodied selves at the end of time as we now know it.

So now when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,” we affirm the ultimate rule of God which according to Jesus was and is breaking into the present world, breaking in to our earth, breaking in here and now ... despite the tears and pain of this present life.

So here is my basic point: The present bodily life – our matter and the earthly, earthy matter that surrounds us – is not valueless just because it will end or die. 'Cause God will raise God's creation to new life. So we are saved in the end not as mere disembodied souls ... but as embodied wholes. And so matters ... matters very much.

And so also what you do in the present – singing, praying, teaching, campaigning for justice, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – are not just ways to make the present life a little less beastly. But all these good things will last into God's final future. Will become part of that building up of God's final kingdom ... joining in God's saving purpose for our world even now.

Wright suggests three courses of action to join in that mission. But in the interest of time, I'm going to shorten the discussion to give you just a flavor of his thinking.

First, work in your local community for better housing, schools, racial justice. Campaign, cajole and work with local government, fostering hope at every level. Second, he says many communities in the post-industrial West are downright ugly, depressing the spirit of all who live within them, sending the message that these folks don't matter. I mean, go a few blocks off Broad Street downtown and just take a look! Wright argues that when folks cease to be surrounded by beauty, they cease to hope – they get the message that they're not worth very much. So maybe parks and landscapes and street art can give hope for the beauty of the world to come. So work to enhance the beauty of this world.

And third, evangelism – sharing the good news of a new world already begun, a world of healing and forgiveness and new starts and fresh energy. All – all of this is the Good News! News of justice, news of beauty, news of living Christ's life in the world. This is the ultimate view from Mt. Pizgah.

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Well finally, I guess Moses ... never got to enjoy the fruits of his labor from his mountaintop view. But then, none of us really do, do we? But see ... I believe the justice of God is not that we're allowed to complete what we've begun. No, the grace-filled justice of God is that we're allowed to participate in what God has begun.

See few of us can control the conclusion of our lives. And all of us will die with our work yet unfinished. But though we may not be able to make a perfect end of it, by God's grace ... by God ... we're able to make a beginning. And that ... is no small thing.

The nature of faith is life lived in hope ... despite this incompleteness. What each of us has is the opportunity to begin right now that whole journey that takes us from the crest of Pizgah into the valleys, the highways, and the byways of our longest journey ... until we reach that Land glimpsed from afar, that final creation promised to us by our God.

And so shall it be. Amen.

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1. Resources used: Deuteronomy by Patrick D. Miller (Interpretation Series) Synthesis for October 25, 2020.