

Starting What We Cannot Finish  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
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The story of Moses' death is one that might make us sad. Moses was the leader of the Jewish community for decades. He led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years, and throughout the journey, he kept the faith. Now as he was nearing the Promised Land, God tells Moses that he will not be allowed to enter. He will die before his journey is finished, before his dream is realized. In short, he will not be able to finish what he started.

It seems unfair. We know Moses wasn't perfect, but God doled out what seems a harsh punishment for a man who had done so much for his people. Moses died a peaceful death. He was 120 years old at the time of his death. He still had his sight and his personal vigor, we are told. He had come a long way, overcoming many obstacles. He was handpicked by God to lead the people to the Promised Land, and yet he did not get to enter.

Moses started what he could not finish. Much of life is like that. Yet life is not about reaching a destination or achieving noteworthy goals, but about the journey with God. That journey comprises our daily spiritual walk, where we encounter all kinds of challenges and opportunities to be faithful.

Maybe what God wants is for us to realize that God is with us each step of the way, and that is enough. God's guiding presence was confirmed when God allowed Moses to catch a glimpse while hiding in the cleft of the rock. That was all Moses needed.

He was always on a journey, always on a quest. His life had a mission and a purpose. And yet Moses was not able to personally taste the sweetness of the Promised Land. It seems unfair. But we find the reason for this seemingly harsh treatment back in Numbers 20. The scripture explains that Moses struck the rock at Maribah with a stick, instead of speaking to the rock as God instructed him, and it was considered disobedience to God.

Really, that's it? What's the big deal? In verse 12, the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I gave them." (Numbers 20:12 NRSV)

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Moses was not the first person who wouldn't live to see his hard work bear fruit in his lifetime, and he wouldn't be the last. Abraham never saw the land promised to his descendants, but he was faithful throughout the journey. Other prophets and apostles would also not live to see their life's mission completed. The Apostle Paul had hoped

to see the conversion of the Roman Empire, and expected to see the Lord return in his lifetime. Even Jesus died without seeing many of the fruits of his teaching, and the movement that would bear his name. He was only thirty-three. His was a life cut short. It would be up to others to carry God's vision forward.

The Bible has many examples of servants to whom God had given a vision, yet they did not live to see the fruits of their labors. They started what they could not finish. Our job is to live a faithful, obedient life in response to God's grace and guidance. God will do the rest. Our task is to plant the seeds and water them. God will reap the harvest.

One of the leading pastoral concerns that I have encountered over the years is people expressing their deep disappointment about letting so many things go undone in their later years. Is it ever complete? It is our task to come to terms with this in the second half of life. Joseph Campbell talks about "making friends" with our shadow.

I know people who wanted to do more for their children. They wanted to accomplish more in their lifetime. They somehow felt that their life was incomplete. I know that feeling in my own life and ministry. My wife and I had the pleasure of starting two new churches from the ground up, and in each case, there came a time when we had to let go and trust the future generation of leaders, and hand off the reigns to someone else. We put it in God's hands, and moved on to the next chapter. We started what we knew we could not finish.

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So what are we to take away from this today? First of all, understand that the journey is more important than the destination. Although Moses was an instrument of God, the story is not about Moses, but guiding God's people one day at a time through the wilderness and towards the Promised Land. Many did not make it. Moses himself only made it to the doorstep.

God does not call us to be successful, but God does call us to be faithful. Moses was faithful to the very end. It is the story of a life well lived. He lived his life with the deep understanding that God was guiding him, and would provide for the needs of God's people.

Secondly, the story of Moses is a story about perseverance. Moses kept going forward even when the odds were against him. Moses remained faithful even though there were times when he wanted to quit, and his people rebelled against him.

Third, God was with Moses every step of the way. It was the assurance of God's presence that kept Moses going. Moses never set foot in the Promised Land, but at least he got to see it from afar. He died, but God's vision survived.

Following Moses, another leader, Joshua, would be the one to enter the land with God's people. The mantle was passed from Moses to Joshua. Faithful leadership of the people would continue. There would still be challenges ahead. But as in the past, God would be with them.

As I said before, and it bears repeating, Moses was not called to be successful; he was called to be faithful, and so are we. God will take care of the rest. Like Moses, we will face many obstacles and challenges. Chances are, we will start many things in our life that we cannot finish. The bigger the dream, the more the likelihood that we will not be able to see it to fruition.

It is the goal and challenge of every Christian generation to hand off the leadership and vision to the next. As one Christian educator put it, "Christianity is always one generation away from becoming extinct."

Think of the founders of our church here. What has it been? Over fifty years? They had the vision and provided the leadership to hand this church down to you and what it is today. Think about Pilgrim Park, and how the blessings abound over the years.

Think about the bigger vision, and the things you might start, but cannot finish. You can plant the seeds for redwoods, but will never see them become magnificent trees during your lifetime. You may have dreams of writing a book, or accomplish some great project, and time will run out. You may have goals to use your spiritual gifts to the fullest, but they will not be perfected until you see God.

I will probably never live to enjoy grandchildren, but I extend prayers and blessings to our sons and what their future may hold. Sometimes I think I may not even see the day when they get married! But first things first! But I recently found out that Josh has a new girlfriend, so there is hope!

I often think of a key verse Paul wrote to the Corinthians when he might have been pondering what he would have to leave to future generations. He wrote: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." I Cor 3:6 I love that verse! "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

How beneficial it might be if we could ponder that verse often in our daily lives. In retrospect, it may be a blessing that our time is limited. It forces us to have priorities and be good stewards of our time.

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Growing up through the early grades, I often heard my teachers say, "Don't start what you cannot finish!" That might make sense for elementary students, but I don't think it is good spiritual advice. Sometimes I think the opposite is true: Don't be afraid to start what you cannot finish.

Many of the heroes in the bible and spiritual giants throughout the ages started what they knew they could not finish, but they trusted God and the next faithful generation to continue their work.

The book of Hebrews calls Jesus Christ “the author and finisher of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2). It’s not up to us to finish. We all want to give gifts that will last beyond our lifetimes. That’s one reason I like to encourage people to leave an endowment to the church, no matter how large or small. It is a gift that will outlive you, and carry your love and desires into the future.

In the meanwhile, just to be able to travel together in this time and place is a blessing, in spite of the immense difficulties. Let’s put our worries about the future aside for this hour we have together. There are treasures in our lives the pandemic cannot take away. Just to see many of you at the outdoor service a couple weeks ago was a great blessing for me.

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We will never be finished, but we can know that God will finish what we have started. Nothing done for God is ever wasted or forgotten. One day I suspect we will see all the good yet unfinished works of God’s people, when we are finally one with God, and can see all things as God sees them. As Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

1 Cor 13:12

What will be in the books about you when you are gone? What will they say when they gather to remember you? Hopefully they will take a tip from the life of Moses, and say, “He or she started what they could not finish, because God’s dream for their life was so much bigger than their own.” God finished the rest. Amen.

## Deuteronomy 34:1-12

### The Death of Moses

1 Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, 2 all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, 3 the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. 4 Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it."

5 And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. 6 He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. 7 Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. 8 The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

9 Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses.

10 Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, 11 who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. 12 For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.