

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

**“Beyond the Dust”**

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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When you hear this story about Moses at the end of it all... only seeing the Promised Land... not entering in... not breaking the string at the finish line (as someone at Lectionary Breakfast said)... When you hear this story... does anyone want to scream, **“Unfair.”**

After all he went through... staffs turning into snakes and being chased by Pharaoh's chariots. People grumbling and whining and making golden calves.

After climbing up the mountain over and again into God's presence...

After the headaches of leading a nation round and round in a desert...

After a never-ending diet of manna...

Don't you think it's unfair that God doesn't let him into the Promised Land?

And if you're not going to let him in, why show him? Someone at lunch said that it almost seemed cruel.

And those of us who know the story are quick to site chapter and verse about how this was the consequence of Moses disobedience to God. He blew it along the way... one time... didn't trust God and this was the punishment.

And it seems harsh, but the story does, at one level, want to say, **“See, even for Moses, there are always consequences to disobedience... Even Moses must face the consequential music.”**

The story says, there are no exceptions... just in case we were thinking in our narcissism that there might be. Live as I want to and it won't matter.

Not invest in relationships and still be loved.

Treat my body however I want and still get to spend time with my grand kids.

Or maybe it's “we”... not just “I”... we who have forgotten the lesson offered from the top of mount Nebo. We can do whatever we want.

Oppress a race...

Misuse our power...

Consume way too much of the world's resources...

And still have a planet and a world that works and isn't eaten up with violence and with pain and pollution.

Moses' story says, **“Here's the way it works... there are always repercussions.”**

But still, for me, something in me says, **“God, couldn't you have given Moses more than a glimpse.”**

He didn't ask for the job.

Is this really right? And I do think that's the first response the story wants from us. There's a deeper one, to be sure. But let's just start there... With Moses dying with Canaan in sight... With no fanfare... no memorial service or funeral procession... not even a grave to mark.

But certainly there is a nation full of readers, and you and I saying, **“Is that fair?”**

The Lectionary that developed through the years and that we use... wants to help us deal with that feeling. That's why it paired Psalm 90 with this story. It is a Psalm attributed to Moses... a song that belongs with that narrative. And it's going to help us take our understanding deeper.

But first, a few things to remember about the Psalms.

These are worship materials... They are songs from the temple, not lectures from the ivory tower. Their first function is to help us express, not to teach theology, per se. The Psalmist wants to take us through something.

The Psalms are what human beings,  
     who are trying to know God,  
         need to say...  
                 to God...together.  
 Not necessarily what we need to believe.

So for instance, the Psalmist writes about hating his enemies and how he can't wait for God to kill them all. And we, who've read the gospel, will need to do more than quibble with his hatred of his enemies... but haven't we all hated and wouldn't it be good if we could be that honest about it in worship. And might we also consider who the enemy is...perhaps it's in me? Praying for God to do away with that enemy makes for very good praying.

The Psalmist, will talk about being abandoned by God... and from another perspective we say, **“... not possible.”** But what if we let the Psalm say for us what we've all felt, that God has felt absent and sometimes at the darkest moments.

The Psalms are R rated... raw... raw human experience. And sometimes we edit... make them G rated because it's just too much for beginners. The Psalms are worship materials for insiders who know the whole story.

Now, back to Psalm 90, which expresses for us a great mix of things. Some of it is so positive and some of it, down right depressing.

**“You turn us back to dust... you sweep us away. You're nothing  
     We're like grass that springs up and wither just like that.  
         ... consumed by your anger.”**

**“All our years pass away under your wrath... and we finish with a moan.**

So, it's a Psalm that invites us to say some hard things... because we've felt some hard things. The dustiness of who we are. Remember the modern Apostle Paul, Paul

Simon's, first line, "**When you're weary, feeling small...**" He had nothing on this song writer, "**You sweep us away in the sleep of death... we end it all with a moan.**"

That's probably not one you're going to cross-stitch and hang over the fireplace, huh? No one's going to put that on a bookmark to sell at the Christian bookstore, how lovely - **You're Dust.**

But the Psalmist knows we need to say it and say it in here. Because we've all wondered...

**Do I matter?**

**Is this it?**

**What do I, what will I have to show for it all?**

No wonder there's a voice inside saying this isn't fair when we see Moses standing on Mount Nebo, seeing but not crossing over. From time to time, the dustiness of who we are... the smallness of us... is... so large. We feel too fleeting.

And we should be able to say that and be honest about it...

But... the Psalmist... and I think Moses does not want that to be the last word... And in this Psalm... in and around the dust and despair... there are these wonderful affirmations we need to affirm and prayers we need to pray.

It's interesting to me that it's that way... the affirmations and the dust, right there together... side by side. Faith and doubt on the same page, in the same poem. A line of honest despair follows a line of great hope. That's interesting... and right. That's the way it is.

We don't get faith right and find ourselves removed from darkness. Ask Jesus someday... that's not the way it was for him. He comes up out of the waters of Baptism... it's glorious... there's a vision and he's beloved and then he heads straight into the dusty desert.

So, in Psalm 90 the affirmation comes in the midst of and in between the feelings of smallness.

**"Lord, you have been my dwelling place."** Is that what Moses is finally coming to see up on Mount Nebo? That he never dwelt in Pharaoh's house... or in the desert... His home was never Canaan. He has never really had to journey anywhere, except maybe inward. He has always dwelt in God.

As have we... we may not know it or claim it... but we have never been outside of the Divine. We cannot, not be in God's presence. Bad grammar, good theology. We always dwell in God.

Maybe that's what Moses sees from Nebo. There is a "spacious knowing" (R. Rhor) He gets it... He sees it all... a panoramic awareness. He understands that all things are his and all places... Possessing? Is never what Moses needed to do. He already possessed... he just needed to see that.

The journey he made... the real journey we all make... is inward through the desert there. Because we have to get there, or the limits of this life, of time, of our bodies... the "dustiness" of everything will drive us to despair and we will end life in a moan.

I don't think Moses ends with a moan... he ends it all... seeing it all. Beginning and end. God as Alpha and Omega and his eternal home.

That's the great affirmation and it leads to two very important prayers. The first is, **"teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."** So, there is a relationship between an internal knowing and our awareness that we are finite... that we have an expiration date printed somewhere.

And knowing that changes things, or it should.

What'd you worry about this week? Would you have if God had imprinted an expiration date on your arm? Would your kids C- send you into such a tizzy? Would Thursday's Dow Jones dive have bothered you one bit? What were you angry about? What did you fret over? If you had learned to number your days, would you have nursed that resentment you felt towards so-and-so? Would you have been jealous, if your days... each of them... had a number you knew you could never count again?

And what did you do with those numbered days? What did you enjoy, what did you create?

My dear friend Milton Brasher-Cunningham wrote a lyric for Billy Crockett that I just have to share with you. Milton wrote it when he moved to New England and was 35.

*She saw the sun go down 21 times... 21 times in 35 years... she saw the sun go down. She thought there'd be a million and she thought that she would see them. She saw the sun go down 21 times.*

*She stayed and danced all night, only 1 time. Only 1 time in 35 years, she stayed and danced all night. Moonlight fell like laughter on her happy ever after. She stayed and danced all night only one time.*

*And over New England geese are flying south. And November nightfall, settles round about, while the lighthouse calls another home.*

*She walked away from love, so many times. So many times in 35 years, she walked away from love. Hearing lesser voices, she turned them into choices. She walked away from love so many times.*

*And over New England geese are flying south. And November nightfall, settles round about, while the lighthouse calls another home.*

*She walked away from love... She stayed and danced all night... she saw the sun go down, 21 times.*

What will you do or not do this day because God has taught you to number your days? Maybe you should really enjoy that roast that's cooking in the oven... or a nap in the sun... Maybe you ought to watch a sunset.

And pray God will teach you to number your days.

And pray with Moses that God will establish the work of your hands. It's a way of making who you are a gift to the world. If you end your life saying, **"What about me?"** You will end in moaning despair. If you've offered the works of your hands... I think it will be different.

Look at your hands... they are unique, remember. One pair in a million (or I guess that's, one pair in 6 billion). 12 billion hands in the world, but no pair like yours. Nobody's hands are like yours, never have been and never will be. Look at your hands and think of all they do and can do and will do.

Your hands will touch things no other hands can touch. Shape things no other hands can shape. Hold things no other hands can hold. Just because they are yours and your story is unique.

To pray, “**God, establish the work of my hands,**” is to acknowledge your uniqueness and at the same time to acknowledge that God has chosen to work through the flesh and blood that you are. Your dust is transformed by the eternal nature of God. To pray, “**establish my work,**” is to see yourself in cooperation with the Divine plan.

“**I’m no Moses,**” you say. Good, God never asked you to be. When you’re on Mount Nebo with God, God isn’t going to ask you, “**Why weren’t you more like Moses?**” **It’s going to be, “Why weren’t you more like you? What happened to the work of your hands?”** (A thought borrowed from someone, I can’t remember who)

This perspective calls us to trust and to plant seeds out there which will become trees under which will never sit. “**Take this work of mine, God... it’s yours to use.**”

My grandfather set some funds in a college trust for great grand children that he knew he would never see walk the stage. It takes faith to invest in life knowing that your work can create a ripple that will wash up on someone else’s shore years later that you will never know.

I’m aware, that I never sit alone in my office. The work of a million hands is in there with me. I look on my shelves... centuries of handiwork from Saint Augustine to Madeleliene L’Engle.

I look on my wall... diplomas from institutions begun by someone else’s vision and sacrifice. Church members long ago made most of it possible. Little old ladies in pillbox hats who tithed every Sunday.

On a shelf there’s a hymn lyric framed. When George Matheson wrote,

*“O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer fuller be.”*

When he wrote that did he know it would keep me going in the darkest of days or did he just pray to God, “**Establish this?**”

There are pictures in my office... of people who taught me and cared for me and walked with me. You have photos like that.

Look at your hands and remember that you are a part of something wonderful called the Kingdom of God where little things can always be multiplied. In your dustiness, don’t take your hands too lightly. Wake up everyday and pray that your handiwork be established in someone’s life.

Isn’t life wonderful... so challenging but so wonderful?

Isn’t life full... fleeting but so full, so many sunsets?

And isn’t it just right, that as we own up to our own small dusty lives, God shows us all that is ours. *All things are mine, since I am his*, the songwriter says... and to that we can all say a glad, Amen.

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