

Introducing a 5-week holy land tour!

Have you ever had the privilege of visiting the holy lands? Believers have made pilgrimages to the lands of the Bible for centuries, and not just Christian believers. The 0.35 square miles of Old City of Jerusalem is divided into quarters. In the Christian quarter pilgrimage is made to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a 4th century church built over the sites traditionally believed to be the place of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Jewish quarter is where worshippers gather at the Western Wall, a remnant of the Second Temple. The Muslim quarter is the largest. Additionally, the temple mount is covered with Muslim holy sites including the promenade 7th century shrine, The Dome of the Rock. Interest in the holy lands reaches far beyond Christianity and far beyond Jerusalem.

In 2018, I had the opportunity to be one of those to go on a tour of the holy lands. Over the next 5 messages we will take a holy land tour of our own, focusing on some sites that I found especially meaningful.

Our first stop is Mount Nebo!

Mount Nebo

My journey to Nebo did not require 40 years in the wilderness but nearly 40 hours in or between airports. I left Seattle and traveled through New York and Paris before arriving in Ammon Jordan. We were exhausted. With each leg of the trip more people joined our tour group. By the time we arrived in Ammon there were enough of us to fill a bus. Several people in our group had their baggage lost. That first night I could use some sleep, but I was too excited. On the first level of the hotel there was food, humus, olives and so much more. In another banquet hall there was a wedding. I stood in the hall looking through the doors to observe. I don't have a special interest in weddings but this one was so full of cultural flair that I wanted to take it all in. The next morning, we began our first day of touring. It was a Friday. In the morning we visited some ruins in Ammon. In the afternoon we made our way to what would become one of my personal favorite sites, Nebo. We stopped at some shops and interacted with the vendors. I bought a Jordanian headscarf. We stopped at a church with an ancient mosaic tile map of the holy lands.

Then the bus drove us to the top of Mount Nebo. I have been on lots of mountains, and I always enjoy the view from the top. But this time I looked out and saw Bible lands. There was a lot to take in. From the place where I stood there was so much history spread before me. To the south was the dessert where the Israelites had wandered, longing for a Promised Land. The view faced west. I saw the Dead Sea. I saw the Jordan River where God would part the waters for his people to claim their promised inheritance. I saw Jericho where the walls came tumbling down. I saw the hills of Jerusalem where God's people lived and eventually Christ would die. I couldn't see Galilee or the Mediterranean coast, but it was out there, not all that far away.

I remember the feelings I had as I took it all in. I felt the confidence that this story is real. It happened in a real place that I can see with my own eyes. It was tangible. As I thought about the great acts of God that had happened there, I felt a rush of awe. I got excited to go see all that stuff up close. I felt assurance of God's faithfulness. He led his people in such patient ways in the lands in front of me. I felt longing for our eternal Promised Land. I imagined the excitement on the plains of Moab as the Israelite prepared to follow the Ark through the river. I felt the closeness of the return of Christ. After taking in the view and gathering for worship we walked to a nearby restaurant and enjoyed more excellent middle eastern food. It was a fantastic way to start a tour of the holy lands.

That was my experience on Mount Nebo. Moses had a different experience. As I looked over that land, I knew that I would be going there on my tour. Moses know he would not. Here is what God told him to do in Deuteronomy 32:49-50, "Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession. And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people." God gave Moses two instructions to follow on that mountain, and they didn't include eating at the middle eastern restaurant. He told Moses to view the land and die.

McGraw Consulting Group teaches that promises are foundational to relationships. McGraw identifies 3 types of promises as follows.ⁱ

1. Strong/Healthy Promises

- Promises I am fully committed to keep; You can count on me.
- If I am unable to keep my promise, I can renegotiate my original promise.
- i.e. I will meet you for coffee at 8 am. I will complete my assignment on time.

2. Shallow Promises

- Looks like a strong promise, but an unspoken condition exists.

- i.e. Yes, I will play golf with you on Saturday (unless it rains or something else comes up).

3. Criminal Promises

- Promises that, at the moment we make them, we know we have no intention of keeping.

We have experienced each of these types of promises. We know what healthy, shallow and criminal promises feel like. We have also experienced Nebo Promises. You have likely not used the term, because it is an original term that I am introducing now, but you have experienced it. A Nebo promise belongs in the “strong/healthy” category. You can count on it but it is not all good. A Nebo Promise is a promise of the bittersweet. To view the land was sweet. To die without entering was bitter.

The best promises this side of the Jordan are Nebo Promises. The vow we take at marriage is for better or for worse. Bittersweet is expected. The sweetness of a newborn baby is met with the bitterness of the pain that this life will endure. The sweetness of success, memories and excitement that you experience at your child’s graduation are met with the bitterness that they have grown up and you will never get those years back. Nebo Promises guarantees both the bitter and the sweet. A Nebo promise is not a broken promise but a promise that lives in brokenness.

Nebo is the experience of being torn. It was both the climax and the end of Moses’ life. It is a tension between death and life, bitter endings and new beginnings, reward and punishment, success and failure, God’s faithfulness and our unfaithfulness, victory and defeat, hope and disappointment. That is all there is this side of the Jordan.

Jesus gave Nebo Promises. John 16:33 is a clear example, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

If we insist on only receiving the sweet, we will be blindsided by the bitter. If we fixate on the bitter, we will no longer taste the sweet. The challenge is not to resist the Nebo Promise but to accept it, to learn to relate to both the bitter and the sweet in faith.

Bitter

The emotional high of the mountaintop is not always filled with pleasant emotions.

The Bitterness of Death

Deuteronomy 32:50 And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.

Deuteronomy 34:5-7

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated.

It does not feel like the story should end that way. We might expect for Moses to find a substitute on the mountain as God provided when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac. It is bitter but it is part of the promise on this side of the Jordan.

Patriarchs and Prophets, pp 470-471

Moses had often left the camp, in obedience to the divine summons, to commune with God; but he was now to depart on a new and mysterious errand. He must go forth to resign his life into the hands of his Creator. Moses knew that he was to die alone; no earthly friend would be permitted to minister to him in his last hours. There was a mystery and awfulness about the scene before him, from which his heart shrank.

Earlier Moses had pleaded with God to be allowed to enter the land (Deuteronomy 3:23-25) but God closed that conversation by saying, “Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again.” (Deuteronomy 3:26). The Midrash on the death of Moses (Midrash is ancient commentary on the Hebrew scriptures) emphasized this pleading. Moses is described as bargaining with God. He even asks that he can be turned into a bird to fly over the promised land, along with many other creative alternatives to dying east of the Jordan.ⁱⁱ These traditional understandings are not something that I consider authoritative but they do communicate the truth that Moses was not just tasting the bitterness of death but the bitterness of death so close to the promised land. He died looking at the thing he had worked for during the past 80 years and was not able to have.

Patriarchs and Prophets, p 477

Again, the vision faded, and his eyes rested upon the land of Canaan as it spread out in the distance. Then, like a tired warrior, he lay down to rest.

The Bitterness of Unfaithfulness

Deuteronomy 32:51

...because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

Moses did not die on Nebo because of old age, his health was strong (34:7). He was not put to death for lack of greatness, he had done things greater than any other man (34:30-12). God ended his life because of an act of sin. Moses knew why he couldn't enter the promised land. He knew it was his fault. Moses felt the bitterness of his own unfaithfulness. He felt guilt, shame, regret, weakness.

Patriarch and Prophets, p 472

As he looked back upon his experience as a leader of God's people, one wrong act marred the record. If that transgression could be blotted out, he felt that he would not shrink from death. He was assured that repentance, and faith in the promised Sacrifice, were all that God required, and again Moses confessed his sin and implored pardon in the name of Jesus.

Moses knew the specific sin he was guilty of. This act is recorded in the following passages. The text says, "...because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel."

This story is recorded in Numbers 20. Notice what it was that offended God.

Numbers 20:10-13 (emphasis added)

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall **we** bring water for you out of this rock?" And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in **me**, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed **himself holy**.

Moses sinned in exulting his own ability over God's holiness. He missed the opportunity to present God as the faithful provider for his people. This is the sin that weighed on Moses as he walked up that mountain. The weight of our unfaithfulness before God is bitter. But it is part of the promise. Jesus told Peter, "you will deny me." Paul tells us, "all have sinned". A Nebo promise does not allow us to deny our own unfaithfulness. Suffering the consequences of sin does not mean you are lost! Our mistakes may still hurt in our relationships, our finances, our reputation, or our health but that doesn't mean God has failed us.

The Bitterness of a Painful Future

God allowed Moses to see the sweet view of the land and the promise that the people would enter. God could have left Moses knowledge of the future in that sweet place. Moses would have appreciated the allusion of a happy ending. Instead, God included the bitter.

Deuteronomy 31:16-18

And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?' And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods."

It feels cruel of God to share this message with Moses. It had been Moses life work to lead the people to faithfulness. Moses knew that he was dying. In response to this he wrote the book of Deuteronomy, calling the people to faithfulness, obedience, and trust in God. He gave passionate appeals for them to choose life. He warned them that when they crossed over the Jordan there would be temptations to unfaithfulness and he labored to equip them for faithfulness. When he knew that he would not be entering into the promised land he poured himself into preparing the people for faithfulness in the promised land. Like a parent who labors to give a child a better opportunity than they had, Moses labored to lead the people to faithfulness in a land he was not allowed to enter.

Death is never sweet, but there is a sweetness in the hope that our life work is not wasted. God shattered that hope for Moses. What was God doing?ⁱⁱⁱ When someone gives their best efforts into raising their children, they might die in peace with the thought that their children are doing well. The last thing they want to know is all the way their children will suffer in the future. Your legacy could be lost. The thing you built could crumble. But it would be nice to die without knowing that deflating news. God was including the bitterness in the promise.

Patriarchs and Prophets, p 472

As Moses reviewed the results of his labors, his life of trial and sacrifice seemed to have been almost in vain.

It is easy to see God's faithfulness to his promise when the red sea parts. It is not so easy to see it when you climb the mountain you will die on and believe that your life work will fail.

Sweet

The place of bitterness is also a place of sweetness. They come intertwined. Lift your eyes and take in the view.

Deuteronomy 32:48-49

That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession.

Deuteronomy 34:1-4

Then 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, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And the Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there."

Take in the sweet view of God's faithfulness in our unfaithfulness!

Moses felt the bitterness of his own unfaithfulness. He learned of the bitterness of the future unfaithfulness of the people. And yet, in all the failure, God was leading them to inherit the promised land. There is a reason God pressed Moses to feel his own failure. There is a reason that God told Moses the bad news about the future failures of the people. There is a message in all of this. ***Our hope does not rest in our faithfulness to God but in God's faithfulness to us. This is a truth that God had for Moses in his final moments. Moses struck the rock. The people did not obey God's commands.*** His faithfulness is stronger than our unfaithfulness. Our spiritual walk is covered with dark spots. It sure is a good thing that our hope doesn't rest on any of that stuff. It is the righteousness of Christ that saves Moses, the Israelites and you and me. Moses got a sweet glimpse of his unfaithfulness being swallowed up in the faithfulness of God.

When Moses struck the rock he turned the attention from God to himself. To find the sweetness in our failure we must turn the attention off ourselves and back to God.

Romans 3:3-4 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar.

Right after God told Moses that the people would rebel he instructed him to write down a song as a witness against them (Deuteronomy 31:19). The lyrics of the song are more bitter than sweet. They highlight Israel's unfaithfulness. You know what else they highlight? God's faithfulness. Here is one of the lines (Deuteronomy 32:4), "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Do you taste the sweetness? Even though you have been and will be unfaithful, God is faithful and your hope rests not on your unfaithfulness but on his faithfulness.

Take in the sweet view of God's faithfulness in the past!

A Nebo promise doesn't often promise speed. Consider how long God's people had been waiting for the promised land. It was a promise given to Abram in Genesis 12. It was not first given at Nebo but in Ur 675 years earlier. It is a promise that was kept before the Hebrews through the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Jordan and the wandering in the wilderness. There was some excitement to see that land. The view affirmed that God was faithful in the long journey. God's faithfulness had led them out of Egypt, it got them past the golden calf, it overcame the delay of the bad reports from the spies.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Patriarchs and Prophets, p 471

In solitude Moses reviewed his life of vicissitudes and hardships since he turned from courtly honors and from a prospective kingdom in Egypt, to cast in his lot with God's chosen people. He called to mind those long years in the desert with the flocks of Jethro, the appearance of the Angel in the burning bush, and his own call to deliver Israel. Again he beheld the mighty miracles of God's power displayed in behalf of the chosen people, and His long-suffering mercy during the years of their wandering and rebellion.

The sweetness of that view reminded Moses that it had all been worth it. He chose suffering for God over the treasures of Egypt (Hebrews 11:24-26; 23-30 a). Consider what he left. He would have been the greatest person in the greatest kingdom on earth. He left it all for a promise.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

2 Corinthians 4:16-17 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Philippians 3:7-8 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

As he saw the view of God's faithfulness in the past, he knew that the promise was worth holding on to.

Take in the sweet view of God's faithfulness in the future!

As we have considered, God told Moses about the unfaithfulness to come. He also gave him supernatural sight. The sites Moses saw as recorded in Deuteronomy 34:1-4 are not things that can be seen by the natural eye. God supplied vision to Moses to take in more than the physical view. The account from Patriarchs and Prophets suggests that Moses was allowed to see visions of God's faithfulness throughout earth's history while taking in the view from Nebo. He looked through the eyes of faith.

1. **He saw Israel claiming the inheritance! PP472** *Every part of the country was spread out before him, not faint and uncertain in the dim distance, but standing out clear, distinct, and beautiful to his delighted vision. In this scene it was presented, not as it then appeared, but as it would become, with God's blessing upon it, in the possession of Israel. He seemed to be looking upon a second Eden. PP 475* *Moses saw the chosen people established in Canaan, each of the tribes in its own possession.*
2. **He saw Israel's unfaithfulness in the Land** (and God's faithfulness)! **PP 475** *He had a view of their history after the settlement of the Promised Land; the long, sad story of their apostasy and its punishment was spread out before him.*
3. **He saw scenes of the first advent! PP 475** *He was permitted to look down the stream of time and behold the first advent of our Savior... Bethlehem. Nazareth, Olivet, Gethsemane...the betrayal, the crucifixion.... beheld Him coming forth a conqueror, and ascending to heaven...*
4. **He saw the spread of the Gospel! PP 476** *Moses beheld the disciples of Jesus as they went forth to carry His gospel to the world.*
5. **He saw the Earth made new! PP 477** *Still another scene opens to his view--the earth freed from the curse, lovelier than the fair Land of Promise so lately spread out before him. There is no sin, and death cannot enter. There the nations of the saved find their eternal home. With joy unutterable Moses looks upon the scene--the fulfillment of a more glorious deliverance than his brightest hopes have ever pictured. Their earthly wanderings forever past, the Israel of God have at last entered the goodly land.*

In God's world we can see the end. We can hold onto the sweet parts of the Nebo promise while we go through the bitter.

The Death of Moses was not the end of the story. It was just the end of Moses' part in it. They mourn for 30 days but the weeping is not the end of the story. Listen to the immediate hope after Moses' death.

Deuteronomy 34:8-9

And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

“And Joshua”... They had not come all that distance and suffered defeat. God had prepared a leader to take the place of Moses. There is sweetness in knowing that God is faithful beyond my chapter in the story. The sweetness of the promise does not end at death because God is still alive. God always has a plan to continue his promise beyond our tragedy.

Now it is your turn to climb the mountain and take in the view of the Nebo Promise. What bitterness and sweetness do you feel in the moment or see on the horizon? How will you respond? While we remain on this side of the Jordan, embrace the Nebo promise with the bitter and the sweet. In the place of our pain is a fresh glimpse of God’s promise. Soon we will cross the Jordan and enter the land.

ⁱ <http://www.consultmcgraw.com/featured/3-types-of-promises/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/sites/default/files/resources/document/midrashim_on_death_of_moses.pdf

And <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTJDPmE1O-Y&t=1536s>

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this though listen to Speak Lord Episode 100, I Don’t Want to Hear It <https://palmersdachurch.podbean.com/?s=hear>