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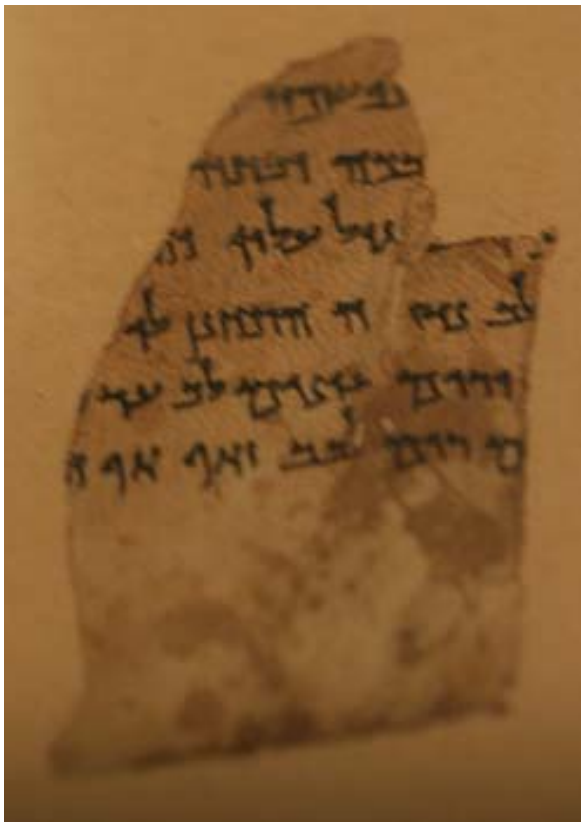

EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

"FINISHING WELL"
DEUTERONOMY 34

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After an epic battle, the emperor was now the undisputed master of a vast subcontinent. Yet it was a hollow victory for Shah Jahan. His wife had just died in childbirth, and he was in utter despair.

For nineteen years the Princess of Persia had been his soul mate. Their passionate love affair was the stuff of storybook legend. In an age when Asian kings kept their women hidden away in harems, she was his chief advisor and confidant. She even rode by his side into battle. She also gave birth to thirteen of his children, and died delivering the fourteenth.

His grief was monumental. For eight days he locked himself in his private chambers, refusing to eat or drink. When those in the palace heard the animal moans and anguished howling from behind his closed doors, they were sure that the Shah had gone mad. When he finally emerged, they gasped in horror. His raven black hair had turned snow white. He was now stooped over like an old man. In only eight days he had shrunk in size.

He demanded that his millions of subjects join him in a year's mourning. A decree went out banning all popular music, public amusements, perfumes, cosmetics, jewelry, and brightly colored clothes. For the next year, those caught smiling, laughing, or engaged in any pleasure, were dragged before tribunals. Thousands were tortured and executed. The Shah's sorrow had reduced his vast kingdom to the most desolate place on earth.

Then he turned his grief into a frenzy of activity. He imported the finest architects and craftsmen to build the greatest monument to love the world had ever seen—a magnificent mosque that would house the treasured remains of his departed wife. More than 20,000 workers took 22 years to build it. Thousands of elephants dragged in the most precious stones and timbers from all over Asia. The mosque, together with its gardens and reflecting pools, covered 42 acres. It cost billions in today's dollars.

Centuries later, it remains one of the architectural marvels of history. It has been called the eighth wonder of the world. When the project was complete, the Shah ordered the architectural plans destroyed and the architects murdered so that their genius could never build anything to rival his magnificent memorial to his wife. Afterwards the hands of the master craftsmen were cut off so they could never be used again.

Perhaps you have seen the monument that Shah Jahan erected to his wife, Mutaz Mahal—the breathtakingly beautiful Taj Mahal. The wife of a British officer once said, "I would gladly die tomorrow if some man loved me enough to put such a building over my grave." When he first saw the Taj Mahal, Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "It is the one teardrop of grief that glistens spotlessly on the cheek of time forever."

You may have gazed in awe at the Taj Mahal, but do you know the dirty little secret that will never appear in a tourist guidebook? When Shah Jahan was visiting the work site, he tripped over a wooden box that had been

carelessly left among the rubble. He angrily ordered it thrown away. The terrified workers tossed the box onto a nearby garbage pile. Only later did they discover the horrifying truth: that box contained the remains of the Shah's beloved wife, Mutaz Mahal. By then it had disappeared forever.

At the center of this "eighth wonder of the world" is an ornate but empty tomb that perpetrates one of history's greatest frauds. And the remains of the woman for whom it was built lies buried amongst forgotten garbage.

The Taj Mahal stands as mute testimony to the tragedy of wasted life. Like Shah Jahan, we can give our energies to great endeavors. We might be motivated by the noblest of reasons. Millions may even admire our achievements for years after we die. Yet, like Shah Jahan's *Taj Mahal*, our life's work may be a magnificent façade hiding an empty hoax. A *Fortune 500* CEO wrote, "I spent my whole life climbing to the top of the corporate ladder only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall."

Today we come to the last episode of the Exodus. Moses is about to die. Most of us don't like to think about death. Comedian Woody Allen quipped, "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Yet no one can keep the *Grim Reaper* at bay. An Italian proverb says, "When the game is over, both king and pawns go back into the same box."

One day both the great and small will stand before God to give an account. It won't matter how impressive we were down here. But it will matter what happens on the other side of the finish line. Yet there is so little focus today on finishing well. On the eve of his martyrdom, St. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:6&7, "The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." Surely Moses could have said the same thing. How about you? The thing I fear most is that my life's work could be exposed to be as fraudulent as that of Shah Jahan. That's why I want to learn the 14th principle of the Exodus:

Do not fear death so much as the inadequate life.

The obituary for Moses is written in the 34th chapter of Deuteronomy. After forty years of crossing the most desolate string of deserts on planet earth, he has brought his people to the edge of their Promised Land. It's been a gut-wrenching ultra-marathon, but he's finished his course.

Now he begins the lonely walk to his gravesite. As he trudges up the rocky spine of Mount Nebo, I see him pause every so often to catch his breath and look back at the camp below. It's getting smaller with every step he takes, and he's feeling lonelier with each look back. He has loved these people for 40 years. Now he's going off to die alone. The desert winds carry laughter of children and the playful banter of families gathered around distant campfires. But Moses won't be joining them this evening, or ever again.

Finally, he reaches the summit. It seems that the most significant moments of his life have been on mountaintops. He gazes at the Promised Land opposite the Jordan. He's so tantalizingly close, and yet he might as well be

a million miles away. He sees both the success and failure of his life. With dogged determination and faith, he has forged a nation out of a ragtag rabble of slaves and led them to the land of promise. Yet, because of the one great sin in his life, he is not allowed to go into the Promised Land. It must be maddening to come so far, and yet fall so short; to put up with so much, and yet fail to grasp the thing you wanted most.

We can all identify with Moses. Life is littered with regrets. We could all admit that there is more than one *Promised Land* we never entered. Like Moses, our lives are a mixed bag. I don't know what he's thinking as he stands on the last mountaintop of life, but I know what I'm hoping as I stand alongside him: despite all the times I've stumbled along the way, I want to finish well. Let's walk with Moses to his grave and see what we can learn.

1. Death keeps its appointments. It never bargains.

Verse seven is profoundly significant for us all: "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone." The writer of Deuteronomy is telling us Moses did not die from natural causes. He still had a lot of mileage left in the tank. Even at 120 years of age, he's not ready to die. Yet, death comes anyway.

Hebrews 9:27 says, "…just as man is *destined* to die once, and after that to face the judgment…" Two facts are clear: death is our destiny and heaven's judgment is our destination. The King James Version of Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is *appointed* unto a man once to die…" The Greek word for *appointed* has the sense of an exact day and time. In Psalm 139:16 David cries out to God, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." The Psalmist is saying that, before we were ever born, God had already written in our date book the exact number of days we would live. Ecclesiastes 9:12 says, "No one knows when his hour will come." But the exact year, month, week, day, hour, minute, and second has already been set.

We try to postpone it by living healthy. Someone asked Bob Hope the secret to his long life. He quipped, "I get my exercise by being a pall bearer for all my friends who died of heart attacks while jogging." Comedian George Carlin said it best: "If no one knows when a person is going to die, how can we say he died prematurely?" The truth is: no one dies prematurely. I think of a line from Luigi Pirandello's *Henry 1V*: "As soon as one is born, one starts dying." Heaven's clock is ticking. One day we will cross the great divide and answer for what we have done on this side. It's so critical for us to learn the second truth from Moses' death.

2. It's much more important to learn how to die than to live.

Now come with me to Moses' funeral. There is nothing better than going to a funeral. The wisest man who ever lived wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:1&2,

"A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death is

better than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."

Solomon says three things in this snippet from Ecclesiastes: 1) the most important thing you can strive for is a good name; 2) if you want to develop the character that gives you a good name, attend some funerals. They will do more for you than parties or feasts; 3) because death is the destiny of everyone, we should take it seriously while we still have time.

At a funeral you realize that some day you too will die, and people are going to gather together to remember you. What will they say? What sort of legacy will *you* leave behind? I heard about a young pastor who conducted his first funeral in a small country church. Not knowing the deceased, he asked if someone would say something. No one responded. Again he asked for someone to speak up, but no one stirred. The young preacher was getting desperate. "Would someone please give a good word about our departed brother!" Again, stone-faced silence. Finally he said, "I will not end this service until someone speaks." Finally an old farmer got up, cleared his throat and said, "Well, he weren't as bad as his brother Bobby."

Not everyone is remembered well in death. The famous lawyer Clarence Darrow once quipped, "I have never wanted to see anyone die, but there are a few obituary notices I have read with pleasure." I hope that we could all have said of us the four things that were true of Moses:

1) Moses left without *loneliness*.

At first glance his death seems so pitifully lonely. He dies alone in the desert badlands of Moab. No one is there to comfort him during his last gasps of breath. No one dresses his remains, or lays them in a casket, or gives a eulogy, or sings a hymn, or says a prayer over his gravesite. I believe that God wants to remind us of a harsh reality: even in the most peaceful death surrounded by loved ones, we will face a stark moment of loneliness. It's the moment we all fear most—when we say our final goodbye to this world and let go of everything and everyone we have ever known. We go naked and utterly alone into the great beyond. The French philosopher Albert Camus calls it *terrifying* loneliness. The most ardent atheist is not sure at that moment. What if he gambled everything on nothing and finds God on the other side? The 70s rock band *Three Dog Night* expressed this angst in a golden oldie: "I know there ain't no heaven, but I hope there ain't no hell." On the other hand, even the most ardent believer has a flicker of unspoken doubt. Will the belief on which I hung my eternal hope be vindicated on the other side? There is a terrifying loneliness in dying to this world and going to a place we have never been.

But Moses was not alone. Verses 5&6 say, "And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab, the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave

is." He may have been alone when he breathed his last, but heaven was there to embrace him a millisecond after death. I love the words of British hymn-writer, John Oxenham: "Death begins at life's first breath. And life begins at the touch of death." The angels were watching when Moses breathed his last. In verse nine of his little New Testament book, Jude gives a curious statement about Moses' death. The archangel Michael wrestled with the fallen angel Lucifer for the body of Moses. I don't know what mischief the devil had planned for the corpse, but I know that the archangel Michael won that day. Can you see that great angel tenderly carrying the limp body of the old man to a desert grave that God himself has already dug? Imagine a funeral where angels are pallbearers, angelic choirs sing songs, God digs the grave and speaks a eulogy over the body, "Well done, good and faithful servant." It beats the Taj Mahal every day.

I Thessalonians 4:13 says to Christians, "…do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope…" We do not go alone into the misty shadow lands between here and heaven. Like Moses, an angel will be waiting to carry us into God's presence. In Luke 16 Jesus tells the story of a poor man named Lazarus. He sat in rags outside the rich man's house begging for scraps of food while the dogs licked his running sores. Yet Luke 16:22 says, "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side." There will be no loneliness for believers. With their last breath, the door to heaven opens and angels are there, to carry them home. It doesn't matter what kind of memorial service is going on back home. The believer enters into the joyful company of Abraham and all the saints who have gone on before! Choirs of angels are there to sing songs of celebration. And the LORD is there to speak the greatest eulogy of all: "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master's presence."

2) Moses left a *loss*.

Verse eight says, "The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over." It is ironic that these people who had dogged Moses with criticism, complaints, and grousing for 40 years should now experience so much pain at his passing. They couldn't live with him, but now they can't live without him. As a leader, I learn a powerful lesson in the grief of his followers. Moses never tried to placate them like his brother Aaron did. He never tried to be their best buddy, or win their popularity. He didn't pander to their felt needs, but he delivered what they *really* needed—even when they didn't want it.

Moses always spoke the truth to a people who were always ready to believe a lie. He was faithful when everyone else was unfaithful. He doggedly plodded forward when everyone else wanted to go back to Egypt. He stood strong when others faltered. Moses teaches us that children don't need moms and dads to be their good buddies; they need strong role models who will draw boundaries and get them through tough times. Church folks don't need pastors who tell good jokes, make them feel good, and get them out on time; they need men of compelling vision and uncompromising truth

who will call them to transformed lives. Citizens don't need politicians who pander to their basest instincts; they are desperate for strong statesmen who will call them to blood, sweat, and tears. Moses was a strong leader, a faithful friend, and someone who loved his people through thick and thin. He made a significant difference in their lives, and left a yawning hole behind, because he was a person of character. When we bring grace and holiness to our world, it will be much the poorer when we leave.

3) Moses left a *leader*.

Verse nine goes on to say, "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit and wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses." Joshua was one of Moses' greatest gifts to his people. Joshua was a young man when Moses first laid eyes on him. The 80-year-old prophet saw something special in that young warrior. So he took the young man under his wings, and invested the next 40 years in his life. He also poured his life into Joshua's best friend, Caleb. In short, Moses invested his life in the next generation. He understood that the race of life is a relay race. It's not enough to run your leg of the race and then celebrate your individual achievement. Unless you can pass on to those who follow behind you what you received from those who came before you, you have not finished well.

Shah Jahan built a magnificent monument, but it was empty. Lives that invest in things rather than people are as hollow as the Taj Mahal. At the end of his life, U.S. Senator Paul Tsongas looked back over all the impressive achievements of his life. But he was also broken-hearted because he had sacrificed his family to gain political power and prestige. He said to a reporter, "No one on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time in my business.'" We will cross over to heaven stark naked. And none of the material things we leave behind will last. Recently, the government of India announced that its biggest tourist attraction, the Taj Mahal, is beginning to sink. Some day it will collapse. Shah Jahan built a monument to his own narcissistic grief. In the end, he couldn't even find the remains of the wife for which he built his mosque. But it didn't matter by then. The monument became an obsession fueled by pride. A lot of people say that they are working for their families, or building churches for the glory of God, or piling up resources to help others; but they are really in it for their own fulfillment. On his deathbed, the Shah complained bitterly that his children hated him and none of them was a worthy successor. Centuries ago, his dynasty died and no one can even trace their lineage back to him.

Let me remind you: only people will cross over to heaven. You will only take yourself, your family, and those you influence for heaven. The greatest legacy of Moses' life was that he invested it in Joshua, and left behind a strong leader to take them into the future. In an age of entitlements, when we are mortgaging our children's future for our immediate gratification, we need to remember that Moses invested his best in the next generation.

4) Moses left a *legacy*.

Deuteronomy 34 ends with his obituary in verses 10-12:

> "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, 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. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel."

There's a lot of talk today about leaving a legacy. Since earliest people etched crude paintings on their cave walls, Egyptian pharaohs built pyramids, and ordinary people left behind gravestones etched with their names—all screaming, "Remember me! I once walked the face of this earth." Reduced to its lowest common denominator, the Taj Mahal is really the cry of a man who wanted the world to remember that he once loved a woman more than life itself. We still build our Taj Mahals: our careers, companies, homes, and churches. We leave scholarships in our name, and do philanthropic deeds as a lasting legacy to our fleeting presence on this earth.

I sometimes fear that all our talk about leaving a legacy today is indicative of our narcissistic age. Moses never thought about leaving a legacy. If you read his obituary you will see one thing that jumps out: he was an obedient servant willing to labor in humble obscurity. He had an intimate relationship with God that could be described as "face to face." Because he obeyed God in impossible situations, he performed impossible miracles. His life was so well lived that it left a lasting impression on those who watched him. He left no stone monuments behind to mark his time here. His memorials were made of flesh and bone—the lives of people he influenced. God wrote his obituary in Holy Writ. His deeds were remembered by the generations that followed. And 2,000 years later he stood in the Promised Land on Mt. Tabor. He stood in all his resurrected glory with Elijah next to His LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. Legacies don't come to those who seek them. They are left quite by accident as a result of lives that seek to honor the LORD.

How will you finish? In the 18th Century a Scottish Presbyterian preacher got caught in a violent storm. He stopped by a country cottage, and asked if he could spend the night by the fireplace. As he enjoyed the hospitality, he saw an old man laid out on the table and ready to die. The old man moaned in terror, not ready to face his eternity. After the family went to bed, the preacher crept up beside the old man and shared the gospel of salvation with him. The man received Christ as his Lord and Savior, and then quietly died. When he returned home the next day, he said to his wife, "I saw a wondrous thing last night. I found a man in the state of sin. I saw him in the state of grace. And I left him in the state of glory!" May that be said of all of us. Like Moses, may we all finish well!

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